SAND

OLIVE WADSLEY

Annie Shirley
Stapleford.

SAND

By the Same Author

Almond-Blossom
Belonging
Nevertheless
Payment
Reality
Stolen Hours
Possession
The Flame
Conquest
Instead
Frailty

SAND

BY

OLIVE WADSLEY

"For romance is as the sand and covereth the desert of the heart.'

—Eastern Saying

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To

LOUISE O'DAY STONE

with my love

SAND

CHAPTER I

"It is not fields divide us,
Nor rivers, nor the sea;
And yet where you now wander
I never more can be.

'T is not the grave divides us,
Nor any witch's spell.
Nor yet the walls of Heaven,
Nor yet the gates of Hell.

Yet though the way stood open,
And nothing stood between,
What came to pass communes not
With what has never been."

—MONICA PEVERIL TURNBULL.

"I KNEW this sort of thing would have to be talked out," Cleveland said; he hesitated a moment, considered the point, and added with a note of bravado in his very pleasant voice: "At least, I knew a woman would be bound to think so."

If he had hoped for a *riposte*, an answer struck by his glancing challenge, he received no such satisfaction.

Caro continued to sit perfectly still in the high-backed Venetian chair, a slender hand resting on the dark carved arm, her head tilted slightly back.

In the square below a motor-horn sounded. Somewhere—in the Green Park, Cleveland rather thought—a band was playing, a jolly decent tune too. Good Lord, where was the use of rowing on a summer afternoon?—everything was bound to settle down—it had to when people were married. . . .

He caught sight of his reflection in the glass of a picture, and surreptitiously settled his tie, and his mind drifted to the last lot of ties he had had sent—they were apt to tie a bit stringily, he thought; he must tell Folsam & Bowe about that. . . .

His bored eyes strayed back to Caro, time was getting on, and she had said damn little so far. . . .

"Well?" he queried.

Her eyes rested on him with an inscrutable expression, and Cleveland, staring back, found himself, despite this beastly uncomfortable situation, thinking how beautiful Caro's eyes were—he had always thought so, he reminded himself with a sense almost of conscious virtue, he had always said "Car" had "gorgeous eyes"—so she had, by Jove! and extraordinary too, sort of awfully clear green, and their clearness made them seem childlike. . . .

"John," Caro said gently, "of what are you really thinking?"

Cleveland's boyish smile transfigured his weak mouth, it gave his face an odd strength, charm.

He went across to Caro and stood very near to her and looked down at her, still smiling:

"Of your eyes," he said; "y'know, darling, they're—they're—incredibly sweet!"

Behind the smile his own eyes had been watchful, his whole mind had been on guard, and now, as he met the clear expression of his wife's mood mirrored in her glance, his old sullenness returned upon him for swift defence.

He flung away from her, his voice came a little thick, hurried:

"Oh, God! aren't you ever going to get away from this accursed affair—can't you understand a man? Oh, dammit, I don't know how to put it—but, look here, a man can fancy a woman for a bit—and—and yet never let it touch his real life—his real love for his wife——"

"I can quite believe that," Caro said, "I can even accept it."

"Well, then, darling, look here," John broke in, "if you *can* be so generous, so—so forgiving, and all that, why not shut the whole thing up, forget it entirely, and let's get on with life? If you *can* understand, why are we here now, fighting over nothing——"

"We are not fighting over nothing," Caro interposed, "we are not 'fighting' at all, we are here to come to some understanding about your life and mine."

"All that, all over again?" Cleveland said irritably. He flung away petulantly.

"We have never really discussed it so far," Caro answered; she rose and walked across to John, staring moodily out of the window.

His profile was towards her, she studied it for a moment, and was aware, with that new, devastating vision which had become hers lately, that John also realized her scrutiny and felt pleased about it, he was childishly interested in his own appearance; it had certainly helped him enormously in life, specially with women—Caro broke off these thoughts decisively; the value, or otherwise, of John's extremely good profile ceased to matter at all; she said very quietly:

"John, I never intend to live with you again."

He swung round on her with sudden violence, his head bent, like some animal at bay, his furious eyes fixed on her face; both he and she were tall, though neither, despite the real fineness of their strength, looked of extreme robustness: Caro was white, but it was John who shook visibly, John who showed his lack of self-control by his flare of ineffectual anger, his stammer of incoherent words.

"And," Caro went on in the same clear yet very low voice, "I am going to leave you, at any rate for some time. I start to-morrow."

"Do you?" John got out huskily. "Do you, indeed? Well, I'm damned if you do. I suppose you think I've got no rights, no standing with you, that I'll let you make a laughing-stock of me? You have talked a precious lot about the honour of reticence, your idea of self-control, and all that highfalutin tosh—well, you can start now and exploit a few of these fancy qualities for my benefit. If I've made a fool of myself—and I don't deny that, and I've told you I was sorry, done what I could—your own record isn't so absolutely stainless, is it?"

Caro turned wholly towards him at those words.

"Yes, it is," she said passionately, "it is, you know that it is, in your heart, in your soul, you know quite certainly that Charles and I were friends, and Heaven knows I needed a friend all that hideous, weary time when you were in love with Sylvia Bennett, and did not care who knew it, who said it—or what I suffered."

John stood shuffling on his feet, his colour changing, his eyes defiant, and yet afraid.

"We finished that—at least, I believed we had, but this goes to show the exact value of your so-called forgiveness," he sneered. "Still, even you, I should think, can't very well cite a closed episode about which we've already had one hideous row, as a reason for leaving me now!"

"No," Caro answered in the same, almost expressionless, chill voice, "no, I should not be so unreasonable or so unfair; I am leaving you now because I know you broke your word to me."

"I'd like to know how?" he said thickly.

Caro looked at him again with that inscrutable expression he had noticed in her eyes when he had stood beside her.

"I'd like to know how?" he repeated hostilely.

"Three months ago when we quarrelled so bitterly," Caro said, "you accused me of loving

Charles Forsythe; you put it much more cruelly, more basely; later you asked me to forgive you, and swore you knew you had been utterly wrong. You *did* know you were wrong, you do know it, yet to-day—after—after everything—you introduce that suggestion again. That I will never forgive. It is so vile, so paltry, so utterly contemptible. If ever any man held you in honour, fought for you with me, knowing the truth, yet went on fighting because you were his best friend, and he thought it such a tragic débâcle that you and I should separate after a marriage such as ours—if ever *anyone* upheld a lost and cheap cause, and did it with chivalry, and sweetness, and selflessness, it was Charles—and you know it, and yet besmirch him and me because you want to hurt me, to justify your own faithlessness——"

John went crimson.

"That's a pretty sporting thing to do—chuck that at me again—after all you said," he stammered furiously. "I've told you, I tell you again, I wish to God Sylvia Bennett were dead—I hate her—I hate the mention of her name——"

"Oh, John," Caro said. Contempt choked her for a moment, then she said, "We must not talk like this—I must not let you. I—I think I ought to have told you earlier—I am ashamed I did not. But I—I know the real truth, I know you went back to Sylvia—I know how often you have seen her in these last months when—when you had promised me of your own free will that you would never see her again, I know you were at Clavenys together——"

John gave a quick exclamation, then he shut his teeth on his lip, a ridge of blood started scarlet below that white line, his face was livid, livid and afraid, and dreadfully, terribly ashamed; Caro could not look at that shame, she turned away.

John's voice came to her, thick, poignant and yet humiliating, offering an insult when it should have given contrition.

"Who the hell told you? By God! when I find out I'll make 'em pay. Who was it, I say?"

He laid a burning, hard hand on Caro's shoulder and swung her round.

No humble shame, no recognition of the unspeakable betrayal of their love, but the last and really genuine outcry of a weak and small nature which seeks, even in its moments of abasement, to saddle another soul as well with its own burden and its paltriness, which cannot, even in a supreme hour, refrain from trying to shift its responsibility.

Caro had had a second's hope John would play up, face the charge, accept it, give to her the fairness she was so glad, so anxious to give to him.

Instead: "Who the hell told you?"

She said in a cold voice:

"It does not matter in the least how I know; I do know, and because of my knowledge I am going to leave you."

"Damn it!" John flared. "Haven't I just told you I hate the woman—God, can't you hear the truth of that in my voice?"

His words lit Caro's face and voice to anger.

"How can you, how can you?" she said vehemently. "When you remember—why you—oh, why you loved this woman, you——"

"Oh, love," he broke in contemptuously, "that's where you women make such a fuss over nothing. I had an affair with her—men are like that—we're beasts, I suppose, but there it is—and those sort of things, with us, don't matter. I suppose you'd think I'd lied if I told you I haven't a single memory that counts of Sylvia—as little as that, she mattered, it all died—it was only passion—that sort of thing."

"Don't belittle love—passion—because you failed them——" Caro said wearily. John's eyes sought her face swiftly; he mistook the tiredness in her voice for gentleness—yielding, he crossed to her.

"Caro—listen, look here. I—it was like this, that

b—— Sylvia had letters of mine, I had to get them back; she swore she'd give them to me personally, and only in that way. So I went to fetch them. All this was after you and I had—had made it up, you see. And she was only bluffing, of course—that sort of woman does those rotten sort of things—so I—oh, well, you can imagine. But, Caro, look here, I hated going——"

"Oh, John, don't lie to me any more," Caro said. "Don't, don't. I ask you no questions, you need tell me nothing—or, at least, if you speak, tell me the truth. Because I know it already. I know why you returned to Sylvia—I know the truth about some letters, those you have written to her in the last three months, for she sent me them herself."

"You have those letters—you—you read them?" John stammered; instinctively his hands moved up as if to hide his face, but he kept them down. He stood for a moment clasping and unclasping them, then, violently he swung round and stood with his back to Caro, and she saw the hot blood edge up over his collar and dye his neck crimson, then recede, and leave the skin greyish.

It was as if in the air itself shame hung, and despite the aloofness, the deadness towards all emotion the last months had bred in Caro, the knowledge of John's shame, suffering, hurt her, made her wince.

And she shared his hideous humiliation. She began to speak again, to try by words to dispel the sense of sordidness, but John's voice, hoarse, stammering, broke in instantly:

"For God's sake—don't—don't discuss it——"

She realized the anguished plea, the appeal, but she steeled herself against it. This had to be fought out between them.

"John, we must discuss it," she said very miserably. "Oh, don't you see—we can't—I can't go on as if this had not happened. I could—I think I could

have been generous enough to forgive just—just the ordinary thing—as you say, men let it mean so little, and I fought myself over that before, but it's—it's your betrayal of us—of our very marriage that I can't forgive."

"God! what swines some people are," John muttered, "to keep those letters—send you those—— Caro," he flung round, his hands outstretched, "if you only knew; I've cursed myself a thousand times for ever mentioning Charles and you in those letters, it was vile of me, unspeakably base. I was mad, I think, I must have been—one loses hold when one's jealous, and you kept me off after that first row, oh! you made it up, but things weren't the same——"

"How could they be, just for a little while?" Caro said wildly. "How could they be? We married for love, for what we believed was love, and *because* we believed it, it was. Love to so many people, to most people, until some strain is put upon it, is just that, what they believe it and make it. I loved you, I believe still, even now, that inasmuch as you could love, you loved me——"

"I did, I do, I swear before God I do." He came close to her, and from his white face, for one transfigured moment, there looked the eyes of youth which had once loved her, and which once she had so loved.

"You mustn't," she said brokenly. "Oh, John, it isn't any use any more. It's finished—over . . . all that is left is a chance—such a frail one. I know that—that we might be friends—I could be a friend to you, John."

"A friend!" he said huskily. "My God! what a thing for a man's wife to offer him."

"It is all there's left," Caro said in a trembling whisper.

John made a strangled sound which might have been a laugh or sneer.

Caro lifted her eyes and saw his convulsed face, every trace of tenderness, fineness had been swept

from it, the ignobleness of it struck her back to her own reasoning immobility.

"You think," John got out, "you think I'll take this sitting down, this damfool idea of you and me being friends—when you're my wife. It was your cursed coldness, stand-offishness, which drove me back to that devil. Your sort has a special brand of forgiveness for husbands, it seems to me . . . forgive 'em, and keep 'em off, be sweet to 'em with words, and treat 'em like pariahs! That's what you did to me, and I don't pretend to be a plaster saint nor a stone image of any sort. And all the while you sat wearing a halo and talking of the loveliness of life with Charles until you drove me mad—and then, having done that, you round on me and say you mean to leave me! Whatever I did, I was driven to it; you drove me——"

The old, old cry of the meanly weak, the old, old expression, which is but a confession of cheap self-indulgence, "I was driven to it," acted like a tonic on Caro's weariness of heart and soul.

She said dispassionately:

"That is your excuse then, and your reason, and should be, in your opinion, the crime I have to expiate. You were driven to it—I drove you to it! Drove you to the basest betrayal that is possible, the last, most utterly mean and despicable betrayal that exists, that of exploiting the confidences which were given you when love existed. Unfortunately, the fact you consider a justification is, looked at from another view-point, the best reason why I should leave you. You say my coldness, which you admit arose from my inability to forgive in precisely the way you liked best, drove you to act as you did; you will, I suppose, admit that, should we be able to adjust our differences now, again you would require forgiveness from me? And in that case again, I should only be able to give that forgiveness which is in me, which you find so unsatisfactory, so cold.

And you would again feel justified in acting in any way you chose to beguile the tedium of your days, and still consider I drove you to such action! Life, in fact, our life together, would resolve itself into a series of infidelities (to which you were driven) on your part, and a series of incomplete forgivenesses on mine! Does that appeal to you as the best way of spending life——?"

John made a movement of savage irritation.

"God, what a talk for a man to have with his wife," he muttered.

"Yes, you are right, what a talk!" Caro flashed back. "We will end it. John, I am leaving here to-morrow. I shall travel for a year. You can offer the family any explanation you choose. I shall contradict nothing. I shall see father before I go, and tell him the truth."

"You seem to have it all mapped out," John sneered.

Caro made a little helpless gesture, and obscurely, perhaps because it reminded John of the adorable attraction Caro's "little" helplessness had once had for him, it irritated him now savagely.

"Oh well, you're clearing out and leaving me to a pretty mess, aren't you?" he said thickly. "Nice time I shall have, shan't I?"

Caro gave a smothered cry.

"John, we are parting soon, terribly soon—we have been married not quite four years, I am twenty-three and you are twenty-seven, and out of our splendid promise we've made—we've made just nothing—those years are gone, wasted. You were unfaithful, I was hard—I do forgive badly—and your unfaithfulness and my hardness have brought us to this to-day. We can't go on——"

"I can—I could——" he leapt at any chance.

"I cannot. I have nothing left to give you, I haven't any love any more. Let me go in peace, part kindly with me."

Those words "let me go," touched the primitive in John, roused his possessiveness; he stood beside her, his breath uneven, eager, he was shaking.

"Car," he said very low, "Car—my little love——"

She shrank back.

"Don't, don't. I can't bear it."

"I don't want you to bear it; I want you to break up, and let me comfort you; I want you to take me back—I'll love you with a new love and all the bits that were sweet of the old—some part of my love was sweet, wasn't it, Car——?"

At last the tears came, through them Caro looked at John, shaking her head, shrinking together in sheer worn-out pitifulness. Words dropped between the falling tears:

"Let me go—only let me go—I can't stand any more—everything's gone—my love, my pride—my belief——"

And suddenly John realized that everything had gone, that he was appealing to that which was dead.

He stood off from Caro, he himself was dreadfully near to tears.

"All right," he managed to get out, "I suppose I've been all sorts of a cad—I deserve what I've got. I'll clear out—I shan't—I can't stay to see you go. Good-bye."

She struggled to speak and could not.

She knew John took her hand; she heard a door close; he was gone.

CHAPTER II

"La partie vulgaire de l'âme jouit d'avoir emporté une victoire."—STENDHAL.

THE landing was full of sunshine and beauty and space, it had a glass dome, and through it the sun poured on to the Satsuma jars, emphasizing their delicate olive green and lilac colouring, and drawing from the rose-sprays which filled them, the sweetest, faintest fragrance.

John did not see the space or beauty, but he was conscious of relief, the place seemed cheeringly light somehow after Caro's boudoir, with its lowered blinds and soft greynesses, and old-gold glint, and its chilling atmosphere of reserve and pain. His florid nature responded to this glow, he let out a big sigh.

Gad! it had been a scene!

Some sound made him cross the landing and mount towards his own rooms.

He rang for a cocktail, and whilst he waited, the sense of relief, inevitable to a man of his nature, began to fade a little, and the swift changeableness of the shallow swept him back to the realization that Caro meant to leave him.

Hurt, vanity and resentment banded together against that; he took a cigarette from the box with a hand which was not entirely steady.

Car meant to go.

. . . .Rotten. . . .

As if another woman counted, when your wife was young and beautiful. . . .

Only women were so damn highfalutin and would neither understand nor let you explain.

Sylvia Bennett!

John said the name aloud under his breath, his eyes narrowed; he let his mind besmirch her . . . she was still keen on him. By gad, he'd take it out of her—later.

A footman came in with the cocktail, John drank it in a gulp, and poured another from the shaker.

He began to feel contempt for his own sorrow; after a third cocktail he was encouraging that satisfaction, possible only to people whose minds bear the scullery-stamp through life whatever their owners' breeding may be, of having "got a bit of his own back" in that beastly discussion Car had forced on him.

He had made her sit up over that swob Charles, anyway, got her on the raw there. He lounged in his big chair, his eyes sullen beneath the fine arch of his brows.

Desire, not very potent, desire without any beautifulness, flickered out before the realization he would be quite free—though freedom, when it was granted, and had not to be "wangled for," became somehow of less worth.

Still . . . he shrugged his shoulders. He was between two fires, he wanted to hold and not be held. And, of course, people would talk; though a man generally got a pretty easy let-off—and dash it all, he'd given Car a good time, and she'd had a run for her money with that moonstruck fool Charles.

Another point, if she had not been so wrapped up in Charles' virtuous sympathy he, John, would not have been so hipped.

Some women not only forgave a man, they went on forgiving him!

A year's furlough!

Well, he could stand it.

He rang for his man, the day was not yet fin-

ished, he might get some sort of game still at Roehampton.

Graves came in quickly, he was a little, wizened man who loved and lamented his master.

"You wanted me, sir?" he asked.

"I suppose so, I rang for you," John grunted moodily; he was standing by the window, staring out, jangling his loose change.

Graves waited patiently.

He knew quite well his mistress was going, and he knew all about Mrs. Bennett; he had been quite certain from the first that "Master John" had "picked" a "wrong 'un" there, and he had hoped, as he was aware the lady in question was a lady of changeableness, that she would, as he expressed it to himself, "blow over" fairly quickly. He had been genuinely shocked when he had realized his master had become serious about her; to Graves' mind this was a mistake, comparable perhaps, to allowing oneself to become drunk on cheap spirit. Cheap spirit rather described Mrs. Bennett.

And now, for a reason of so little worth—the breaking point. . . .

Graves did not understand his master in these matters; he had believed him, however careless, selfish and inconsiderate, to possess a sense of values.

This proved he did not.

He stared at John's silhouetted form, admiring abstractedly the wide shoulders and narrow hips, narrow feet, and lean, strong hands. . . .

"Racer-bred," old Graves thought to himself, "in looks."

John turned, his eyes were miserable.

"Not feelin' quite yourself, sir?" Graves ventured.

John caught at the suggestion of respectful sympathy, as the self-indulgent always do respond to the least hint of pity.

"Oh, I dunno! Life's pretty rotten. Don't worry over me. I'm not worth it. What's the time?"

"Five-forty-five, sir."

"Is it, by Jove! Late as that? I'll change now, then, I think, straight away. Run on a bath, will you?"

From the bath-room he called to Graves:

"I am going to drive down to Goring to-morrow for a couple of days, leaving early. Pack in that white tennis coat."

Graves' tame "Yessir" was rendered an expletive by his expression.

Goring—*her!*

"You won't want me, sir?" he asked.

"No, thanks. And, Graves?"

"Yessir."

"I am not sure I shall run this place—we might shut it up and take the lease of Major Barlow's flat in the Albany. Mrs. Cleveland is going away, she needs a change, abroad, y'know, and I shan't want a huge house like this on my hands—what?"

The "what?" came after a pause. Graves answered that readily.

"No, sir, too big; you'd be lonely without the mistress, of course. I hope she'll be better soon, sir."

No answer.

John came in ready for his shirt. He dressed and brushed, and stared at himself in silence. At the door he turned.

"You—er—had better tell the other servants, Graves—what?"

"Yessir," said Graves.

He folded and straightened when John had gone. Beside John's bed, on the table, was a large portrait of Caro, the eyes seemed to Graves to follow him about the room.

He had never been so thankful in all his life as

he had been when John had told him of his engagement to Miss Caroline Torrens—to Graves her name had meant honour, straightness of living, all good things for John——

And now?

Goring, and the house shut up, and every decent thing shut up too, as far as he could see.

CHAPTER III

"Je ne connais pas de premier amour qui ne se termine bêtement!"—BALZAC.

"C'est bien la pire peine
De ne savoir pourquoi,
Sans amour et sans haine,
Mon cœur a tant de peine."
—VERLAINE.

ON the steps John passed his father-in-law; both men nodded, Sir George amusedly, John without a smile.

He had never liked the older man; too damn subtle, and subtlety, John had often said, and received appreciation of the remark, generally meant a chap making himself out to be clever by saying things that were intended to be nasty, in a sort of way that prevented you answering back.

He had not infrequently been the butt of Sir George's light and mordant wit, and like all vain men could laugh at every joke save one of a personal type. His father-in-law's habit of laughing at himself he considered simply foolish.

In the hall, having surrendered to the butler's ministrations, Sir George hesitated an instant; for once in his life he felt a little nonplussed, or he felt actual affection; either sensation had the charm of novelty for him.

He had married Caro's mother, who had died at her birth two years later, because she had been beautiful. She had bored him after the first week, and the remaining years and odd months had imprinted themselves so indelibly on his mind that he had never contemplated marriage after her death.

Neither had he contemplated Caro much until her seventh birthday, when, happening to be at home, he had strayed into her nursery, discovered her to be of extreme thinness, and to hold the promise of beauty.

Thereafter, chaperoned austerely, he had taken her abroad with him, himself chosen her schools, supervised her holidays, and educated her mind. When, at nineteen, she had fallen in love with John Cleveland's charm and physique, Sir George had despaired and acquiesced. John was heir to the title, he was an excellent match, and Caro wildly in love —and wildly loved.

It would have been absurd to combat the affair, and Sir George was never guilty of that greatest of stupidities, attempting the impossible. He only realized how impossible John would become, and betted in his mind how long Caro would take to discover this fact.

He was out by six months, and admired Caro for her dissemblance as much as for her discovery.

And he felt sorry for her, in a quite comfortable way, for he had seen that what had happened must, and had therefore had time to steel himself against undue sympathy.

Personally, he liked John, he was so good-looking, such a fool, so strong physically and so delightfully pleased with himself.

He himself was a tall man with that sandy hair which greys so slowly, and then seems to become silver in a night, a tanned face, thin lips, a charming smile and extremely blue eyes. He dressed youthfully and was a superb horseman, his fortune was comfortable, and he had made Caro a most generous allowance on her marriage.

Pride, wit, intelligent curiosity, hidden by tranquil courtesy, were his characteristics; he had lived much, excellently, and with discretion, and was a finished egoist.

Mounting the stairs slowly to Caro's room he felt

that egotism stir; he was sorry for Caro, hurt for her.

The blinds were up now, and the late June sunshine was lying in primrose bars of light across the small ebony grand and the wide couch with its huge, soft cushions. A Sealyham terrier went to greet Sir George, who picked him up, spoke to him in that voice entirely understood by every decent dog, then put him down.

"Ripping little chap, get him from Staveney?" he asked.

"John gave him to me."

"What's his name?"

"Fleet—because he never hurries!"

Sir George laughed, and Fleet stared at him with interest; after all, why should he hurry? Life was long and his legs very short.

"Chassis very near the ground!" John had said of him.

It was. No one save Fleet knew what happened to most of him when it had been raining and he had had to run.

And if a chap got very dirty that meant another bath.

Sir George had sat down near him, and he bent and patted him now.

"Fleet, are you?" he asked him. "It's a nice characteristic, old feller, fleetness, if not carried to excess! I hear you are safe from that accusation."

He went on talking sensibly and well, Fleet thought, and all the while to himself he was wondering: "How the deuce shall I begin to Caro?"

Caro began for him, after all; she came over to the couch and sat down beside him and said:

"Father, I am leaving John to-morrow."

Sir George went on pulling Fleet's ears very gently.

"You are quite certain you are right, fair, to take this step?" he asked; he did not look at her.

"Yes, I am quite certain. I suppose you have heard of Mrs. Bennett, Sylvia Bennett?"

"Yes. She is second-rate; she will not last, Caro."

"She has already lasted too long, and her second-ratedness makes that fact addedly humiliating."

Sir George looked into Fleet's dark amber eyes, which gazed back at him fearlessly.

"I thought," he said at last, "that you had discussed this matter once before, and I heard that John and Mrs. Bennett had finished their friendship, and I imagined wrongly, I now see, that therefore you would be—happier—settled——"

Caro gave a little, quite unamused laugh.

"Of course, you probably know every detail of this small scandal, better than I, perhaps, but the end of it you have not heard, obviously. John did end that friendship, he and I did settle down, and then—last week, Mrs. Bennett sent me, through a friend, letters of John's to her during the last three months."

"A common woman, my dear, lives by her hatreds," Sir George said gently, and deep within his mind he gave a second's contemptuous pity to John—a bit rough on him, such a *dénouement,* poor, faithless young devil!

Caro had begun a level-voiced explanation.

"I think you will believe me when I say that, even after the letters, I did try and face things as impartially as possible. It isn't just because John went back on his word, it isn't because he has been unfaithful to me that I am going to leave him; it is simply because, knowing him, as he is, I *cannot* stay. I asked for truth between us, and I received lies and betrayal."

Sir George said:

"I suppose you weren't a bit too *exaltée* in those first days of reunion? It's very hard to be forgiven, my dear, only a weak man who has a perfect wife

realizes perhaps just how hard. And then, y'know, Caro, after a reconciliation, women are so apt to demand that life continue at concert pitch, they are hurt when the inevitable reaction sets in, and the poor devil they have raised to their own height falls back to normality, his own depth again. They do not realize that if he stayed where they had put him they would be tired to death of him! It's so seldom if you are really in love that a man's virtues count for most, it's mainly his humanness, and that is a quality which is as many-coloured, and changes its colours as easily, as a chameleon!

"And, frankly, what is John's point of view?"

"Oh, beyond a criticism of Charles Forsythe—his own best friend, who has excused John's absences countless times—simply, 'get on with it.'"

"He, too, has really ceased to care," Sir George told himself; aloud he said:

"Criticism of Forsythe? How, what exactly was his criticism, then? Did it include you?"

"Yes, he once accused me of having Charles for a lover. He withdrew that accusation."

"If it were not a farcical one it would be insulting."

"It is insulting—and unforgivable."

"Still, I suppose you did see a good deal of Forsythe after the reconciliation?"

"I saw him often."

"And John, hypersensitive through his vanity, imagined neglect. One is apt to, you know, when one's wife snubs one a little and is unfailingly gracious to another man!"

Caro gave a weary little sigh.

She said sadly:

"It isn't any good going over and over it all, I have tried to imagine myself in John's place, I have met all his arguments as fairly as I could. But I cannot forgive the betrayal of myself in his letters—and it is no use living with someone you cannot

forgive, it would blot out in time even—even the memories one wants to keep. Because marriage isn't a thing to live down—to forget, escape from easily —marriage with love. I did love John, I loved him so much that I can't bear to remember how much, yet neither could I bear to lose my memories. But I can't live without truth between us, and there would be no truth now, I mean truth of life which stands for trust, and a quite clear, sweet confidence and the sharing of interests, however trivial—there isn't a chance of that left between John and me—there is only one thing left now, for us to realize decently, without bitterness, that we have both made a mistake—I have tried "—she put a hand up to her throat with a gesture almost of desperation—"I have—have tried to be generous——"

She struggled to go on and could not, and abruptly she rose and went to the window and stood there looking out unseeingly at the sunset world of gaiety.

After a long pause Sir George asked:

"What exactly did you mean when you spoke of John's betrayal of yourself in his letters to Mrs. Bennett?"

Caro did not answer, and he looked round swiftly and realized the supreme effort she was making to control herself.

He waited, Fleet pressed against his boot, he could feel the warmth of him, his steady little heart thudding along. . . .

Caro's voice, so low as to be barely audible, broke the silence:

"I think one forgives anything more easily than the revelation to a third person, of one's very small personal intimacies of speech, of habit, which are only not ridiculous and—and laughable when they are shared with the one person who calls them forth, makes them possible, and invests them with a queer, heady little charm because of the love between you.

Divest them of that funny little worth conferred by love, and they become pitifully ludicrous, let them be revealed to someone antagonistic, when you learn of that revelation you shrink away and feel unspeakably foolish, cheap in some way. Every small word I had for John, he for me, every tiny—oh, of course, absurd—habit we had has become matter for extremely common mockery since he told Mrs. Bennett. It isn't, you will own, discretion (such a word is a stupidity between married people) one asks from one's husband, it's just the understanding marriage should give—just consideration of his own. And John feels that for me no longer. You know and I know that when a woman, her ways, her speech, her very mode of life become the cause for ridicule with a man, not only has he ceased to care, but this utter disregard on his part is an irrefutable proof that he never *did* care in the best way, that all he felt was a wild infatuation. You don't belittle someone if you ever loved them. You may be bitter towards them, you may wrong them, but you don't desecrate every memory there was between you by a cheap, vulgar betrayal of them. People talk a lot about hurt love, but I think now that most hurt love, unless a person is very generous, innately fine, is mostly hurt vanity—and if you wound the vanity of anyone without breeding of soul at all, you make him or her not only a vicious, but an incredibly common enemy, an enemy who will stoop even to the gutter to gain an unfair end.

"And John not only encouraged this attitude in himself, but in Sylvia Bennett, and pandered to it. If I continued to live with him, feeling, as I do, I should deserve all the humiliation I should suffer, and all the malicious contempt John and Sylvia would feel for me.

"You cannot, for a minor reason, accept an insult and retain your pride of soul. And if you forgive a betrayal you still despise the weakness which made that betrayal possible, and to despise and love at the

same time is a tragedy for yourself and the person you love, for it means you give a love without splendour, and your contempt is also for yourself.

"I don't exactly know why infidelity, as such, seems a lesser sin than the betrayal of one's mind, one's thoughts, one's personality. I suppose it's because bodily things pass so quickly, but the malicious dissection of words you once whispered, which seemed immortal, words which, however silly and halting their utterance, were coined in your soul, strikes at the very root of yourself; caresses, after all, are of value only in connexion with the person to whom you give them or from whom you receive them, but the words you said in an hour of closest love were things which could never be interchanged nor vulgarized by daily use—they were a part of you.

"I wouldn't have minded John's forgetting me if he had remembered our memories."

There was a long silence, in it London stirred with evening tread, the lamps glowed softly, hanging in the dim light like golden flowers, flickering in the faint breeze like petals in the wind.

Sir George waited patiently; at last, disturbing Fleet reluctantly, he rose and walked over to Caro.

At his touch on her hand she faced him and answered his unspoken question:

"That—that is all, father."

He nodded.

"Yes."

He considered her gravely, and looking at her looked beyond her, too, with sad, shrewd gaze into the future.

It provided a most confusing vision.

Tentatively he said:

"Of course, one knows how tedious one sounds, and perhaps without understanding—but, my dear, time does heal things, soften them down, y'know."

"It does if you can accept time, I mean, if you can bring yourself to believe it has value—but I

can't—if I could, I would have to accept the things that hurt too, acknowledge some sort of reason for them, and I can't. I can't reason about suffering at all, I only want to escape from it, and I mean to by going away."

"I see," Sir George commented; he added suavely: "And when you return, what then?"

"Oh, I suppose, complete freedom, without much notice, without scandal, and without unduly hurting John's people—he can tell them what he chooses. And in a year neither he nor I will be so bitter, and we shall be able to discuss and arrange."

"You seem to have planned everything very capably," Sir George said drily.

He saw Caro's face quiver, and she stood before him suddenly like a child, a child's piteous bewilderment in her eyes, the same air of pathetic hurtness, and he saw in that instant, as clearly as if Caro had translated his vision into words, that her bravado about the future, her attempts at philosophic dissection were but the frail defences she had raised in desperation, to help her to keep any poise, any place in her present life, and that behind her assumed courage of independence lay the ruin of her dreams, her girlhood.

If he saw the future as a cheap hazard, what must it seem to her?

He put out his hand and took hers in a cool, strong clasp, her old nickname came to his lips:

"Look here, Kiddie," he said, "run along and change, and let me take you out to dinner? I'll meet John for you, if you like, and arrange any matters you wish seen to——" he paused a moment, then added, "there is one thing: it is better to do a hard thing gallantly, however you may suffer in the doing, than accept a second-rate compromise."

He patted her hand and released it.

"I will call for you in half an hour."

He waited a moment; Caro nodded.

"Half an hour then," he repeated, going out.

The apricot dusk of a summer evening was drifting into the room, through the open windows came the murmur of the ceaseless traffic, the trees opposite, despite the delicate newness of their leaves, showed darkly green against the wonderful golden luminousness of the sky, in which, like a spray of frail flowers, the first stars shone.

That extraordinary, indescribable ghost of sadness which seems to slip into the soul through the realization of the loveliness of the dying day, a loveliness which, like the swan's song, owes its poignant appeal to its ephemeralness, fell now upon Caro, intensifying her own unhappiness; the fading light and glow, so soon to be buried in the heart of the sky, typified for a moment her own hopes, her dreams which were now grey memories.

And with this thought came another, a paradox to the first, a thought concerning the material things which last, and which would endure when all her griefs, her disbeliefs, her weariness of soul, counted no more.

The familiar room, now when she was leaving it, developed new value, it had been so absorbing, such a wonderful game for John and her, arranging the house before their marriage; this special room John had given to her, let her choose each thing for it, and for her bedroom; the house itself, furnished by successive generations, had been the present of John's uncle to him, but Caro's rooms had been John's gifts of love to her.

Now, in this hour, this room seemed instinct with his past sayings, past laughter, the past happinesses of both of them.

It was haunted, and the ghosts clustered in the tinted twilight, gazing at Caro with beseeching eyes.

What power just "things" had. . . .

The sofa where she had always lain when she had been tired, and over which John had bent a

thousand times to kiss her, the big fireplace before which they had sat together, roasting chestnuts, the dogs crowding in between on the low, long stool. . . .

And above the mantelpiece, John's portrait, and John standing before it declaiming absurdly, to a world which had been Caro:

> "A highly respectable,
> Somewhat susceptible—
> Jolly good-looking young man!"

The remembrance of the words filled the room with sunlight for a second; John was near, his happy head back-thrown, paraphrasing Gilbert—they had been going out somewhere and were to have joined a party, and John had declared to Caro he must take her alone—they could mix in when they got there; it had been the first year of their marriage. . . .

One of the greatest tragedies of love is, not that we fall from its grace, but that some grace of it clings to us in the eyes of the one to whom we gave that love, making our faithlessness so much more heart-breaking.

John, weak betrayer of perfect confidences, breaker of his word, pitier of himself, was yet clothed, in this moment, in semblance of his former sweetness, by the magic of the love he once had felt.

Caro had forced herself to bear the thought of him as he now was, but this moment's vision of him as he had once been, hurt her beyond tears.

She stood in the soft darkness illumined faintly by the reflection from the street lamps, haunted by her lost happiness.

CHAPTER IV

"I yet might seek the assuaging hour
Between the north wind and the south,
If the whole world had any flower
Beside the sweetness of your mouth."
—GERALD GOULD.

UPSTAIRS, in her big cool bedroom, her maid was packing. The bed was a billow of softly mingling frocks topped by a foam of tissue paper; the floor was a mosaic of boxes in all stages of unfulfilment.

From a devotional attitude, assumed from no practice of virtue, due merely to the necessity of probing into the darkness of the boot trunk, Saria surveyed her mistress.

Even in a bent position Saria managed to convey, in some strange way, a sense of cool efficiency. Caro had never known her nonplussed, untidy in speech or dress, or unfailing in devotion.

She attended the meetings of the Ethical Society, had her hair, which was like copper-coloured silk, shampooed in Bond Street; and was an ardent Shavian.

Besides these gifts of cultivation, and attributes of Nature, she was the soul of loyalty. Her only concession indeed to human frailties, it seemed to Caro, was her passion for reading the tea-cup, her skill in which earned her the awed respect of those who fell beneath its spell.

Saria had not second-sight, but she had much chill common sense, which had taught her that vanity, deftly appealed to, will reveal a good deal, and she possessed in addition the gift of appropriate speech.

These assets have provided those who have exploited them for a guinea fee, with a comfortable income, and a consulting-room in a fashionable quarter. Saria laboured but for prestige, and if she would have confessed it, the love of power.

Without the assistance of a single tea-leaf, however, she had summed up her master, and now she rose after that one brief glance at Caro's face, drew forward a chair, placed it for her mistress, requested her to sit in it, and tilted the mirror.

As she began to brush, from between the softly glinting wings of burnished hair, which hung on either side her face, Caro's tired eyes gazed at her own reflection. The wash of candle-light threw a faint goldenness over her, hiding the tear stains.

She said absently, "Candles shed a kindly light."

"Yes, ma'am, though, of course, old-fashioned. But their being popular just goes to prove, in spite of evolution, progress, the electric, that people'll cling to anything that looks nice—gives a pretty effect. I note a tendency too, ma'am, now the first wildness after the war seems settling down, towards old-fashionedness again. Earlier days were restful apparently, which is more than can be said for these. Chop and change——" in her second's pause she realized the possible application and added, "not but what change isn't the best cure for what can't be endured, of course, at all times."

"You aren't an advocate for endurance, Saria?" Caro suggested.

"Only when it's a thing, so to say, that concerns yourself alone, ma'am, like illness. But when someone's done something to you. No. I never yet, in the cups or out, knew any good come of enduring nobly something someone'd done to you who had no right to do it. To them your endurance is just softness; they think you put up with things because you daren't fight 'em. People who'll do mean things, will judge just as meanly, and they need to be dealt

with in a way they'll understand. If anyone hurts you unfairly, get back at 'em at once; getting back is the one thing they can respect, and the harder you do it, the more they're impressed. That's life, ma'am . . . an' it's twenty past, and will you wear the diamond pins in your hair?"

"No," Caro said quickly; she did not wish to wear any very personal gift of John's to-night.

When Saria had slipped her dress on, under the shelter of her cloak she drew off all her rings and shut them quickly into a drawer.

* * * * *

The dinner at the Savoy was a success.

"I chose the Savoy because it's one of the few restaurants where one needn't talk except in the intervals, and they are few," Sir George remarked.

Neither Caro nor he referred to John again. They talked of hotels, possible people to be seen in the various places at which Caro proposed to stop. When they had danced a couple of dances it was eleven.

They decided to look in on Rita Tempest.

"I am glad she is free and can accompany you; I couldn't travel with her," Sir George said, "her voice! I believe some people find it attractive, but I long to tighten it up somehow, and get it to run more swiftly and easily. But you say that drawl isn't affected? I wonder if it drove Tempest to become so successful an explorer of such very remote parts?"

"He went before he knew Rita," Caro answered.

"He has continued going, I notice," Sir George commented.

They were shown into a sitting-room of the flat, and it seemed alight with lilac and almond-blossom. At the piano Mrs. Tempest was trying over a new song; if her speaking voice was considered a failure by some, no one ever attempted to deny the loveliness of her singing voice.

She greeted Sir George and Caro with delight, finished her song because they begged her to, then crossed and stood beside the flower-filled fire-place.

She was small, thin and dark; she had beautiful eyes, and that wistful face which lends itself so admirably to the photographer's reproduction, and in life gives a suggestion of prettiness more convincing than actual colouring or feature.

She had a very slightly boyish look which added to her charm, for she was an excessively *bien-soignée* woman, and had exquisite jewels. The only child of a Canadian millionaire, her marriage to a very poor explorer had been of interest; the fact that Barry Tempest had continued his career after his marriage, of greater.

When people commiserated with her on her husband's long absences, Rita accepted their sympathy, and laughed within herself.

She had waited to marry until she had been thirty, because she had always known the type of husband she must have; the only sort she could feel safe with, secure in the knowledge she could be faithful to him in her mind.

Barry's tactlessness, sweetness of disposition, unfailing tenderness, and total lack of interest in her fortune, her foibles, her tempers and friendships, marked him out as the husband she desired.

He was decent all through, he knew no smallness, he had no vanity, and he saw Rita as perhaps the angels might in their most forgiving moments.

He believed in trust and self-support, had no fads, and was extremely good to look upon, and knew more natural history than the accredited historians: women of all sorts, children, dogs and horses loved him, and he paid every cent of the flat expenses, which explained the smallness of Rita's home.

They had a boy at Harrow whom they adored, who possessed his mother's quickness of mind and his father's looks.

Caro had asked Rita to travel with her on the spur of the moment; Rita had meant her to do so and had said at once: "Yes, of course I'll go with you to France, Italy, Egypt and still further. If Barry returns whilst we're away he can come and find us, and bring Tim if it's his holidays. No maids—or yes?"

She did not even imply that there must be a special reason for Caro's wishing to leave town for an indefinite time at the beginning of the season, neither did she ask what John meant to do. She knew about John, and if she had not known she would have guessed.

Instead, she looked up a woman who had just returned from a long tour, listened to her descriptions, and decided against going anywhere near the same districts.

"Always a good beginning, I think," she told Caro, "a good plan, don't you think, to pump someone who has visited places; they tell you what they enjoyed, and how they worked to do it, and what they sacrificed in personal comfort to see a certain sunset or sunrise, and how little the discomfort mattered. Other people's pleasures are always my warnings!"

To-night she talked on every subject save the start on the morrow; if Sir George found her voice "trying," at any rate, he seemed to like being tried, Caro decided, for he sat on, laughing and listening, and talking.

In point of fact, Mrs. Tempest's voice was not "trying" in any ordinary sense, it was neither metallic nor fretful, it was simply odd, rather arresting in its slow deepness, and she clung to certain colonial pronunciations.

"Dauntless daughter of a Dominion!" Sir George told her, wandering about looking at the pictures, which he loved and knew, and which were all Rita's; if Barry "ran" the flat, his wife filled it;

it might be in a shabby block, but it contained priceless pictures and *bibelots*.

It was very late when Caro reached home at last, she had meant it to be, she was glad.

She let herself in, the servants had gone to bed, the house seemed deadly still.

It was strange to have to turn out the last lights, lock up, she had generally waited for John—before——

Her over-strained mental gaze saw him now; she imagined even she heard him:

"Wait a second, darling—half a tick—curse this bolt—let's make tea—have a whisky-soda—— Tired? Poor baby, come on, I'll put you to bed——"

They had had a "little" language, of course, words glossed over, as a "whisky-soda"—the substitution of ridiculously childish words for others——

Oh, why—why—*how* did things "happen"? How had John ever cared for Sylvia Bennett, why?

It seemed such waste, such cruelty of life. She locked up and began to climb the stairs to her room, her heart aching bitterly.

To-morrow she would be in Paris, and alien walls would surround her, all the little intimacies of life would have been swept away.

A breeze, cool, sweet, was blowing the soft curtains widely from the windows in her own room, one light burnt beside her bed, under a dark shade; the fragrance of her scent and powder was caught in the draught.

She slipped from her gown and into a thin peignoir, and let down her hair.

The last night . . . for a year.

Where was John?

As if she had called him, he stood beside her, and in the dim light she could see his eyes, furious, yet beseeching; hard, yet adoring.

He had locked his arms about her before she could speak even, and then his lips claimed hers fiercely,

almost brutally. . . . Words, broken, only half whispered, reached her—"mine, you're mine—you can't forget . . . nor I—I'll swear anything—I'll keep my oath. Only take me back—Caro—Caro——"

Once before he had called to her like that—after their first quarrel. Now the echo came down the years, tearing her heart. Unconsciously she grew less rigid, unconsciously her lips were less resentful, and with the fire-like intuition of desire, John knew this. The quickening humility he had felt earlier fled from him; a heady sense of triumph took its place.

"I love you, I love you," he murmured, and some note in his voice, a note, had she but realized it clearly, of conquest, reached Caro, as a sound can reach one in dreams, hailing from far, far off, yet minutely distinct.

It was as if her own soul said "No" for her in this hour.

She freed herself by a quite unexpected movement.

"John—please—please go."

"Go," he echoed stupidly, and the real mood was evident in his voice, his next words:

"I'll be damned if I do."

He tried to take her in his arms again, and she thrust him away.

"Don't touch me; I can't bear it——" Then the words poured from her: "John, be generous, be fine at the last. For it is the end. Let me go generously—give me a memory to keep all my life—— If I could begin again I would. But I can't—I can't. I'm all broken up in my heart. Perhaps I'm not big enough to forgive anyone utterly. I don't think I am. I would forgive, but things would stay in my mind—and hurt both our lives. You must let me go—set me free now. Oh, John, John, be kind to me—remembering. . . ."

He caught at her hands blindly.

"Don't," he said, "for God's sake, don't.

"All right. You shall go. I—I deserve it, I suppose—in a way—only—you'd never understand, but some people can be unfaithful—and keep true in their hearts. You think that's all rot—it'll be as incomprehensible to you as your one-idea'dness is to me. Sometimes I think—I s'pose I like to think it because it comforts me—but sometimes I think it's what a man *keeps*—his heart's memories, I mean, that are his only form of faithfulness. He's made so that that's the most he can manage. All my memories of you are beautiful—and—and—clean for ever. That's all. It sounds senseless, I suppose. Good night."

He hesitated a moment, then went out.

The hall door banged after a time, and then there came the sound of a car starting.

CHAPTER V

"A woman may love and not be happy, or be happy without loving, but love and happiness together are a miracle!"—H. D. B.

THE Channel was smooth, the wait at Calais as long as ever, the last bit of the journey to Paris as intolerably tedious as always. And it seemed to Caro that journeys had been invented to stimulate every thought, every memory.

It was as though speed and inaction combined to urge the mind to think, it was as though the paradoxical unison were a forcing-house for memory. Then, out of the dusty, tired, used-up evening Paris rose, gracious, vivid, enchanting.

"I wish each time I come to Paris that it were my first visit, and I'm glad at the same moment that I know it so well," Rita said.

Caro, alone in her big hotel bedroom, wandered wearily about, she really did feel she was free, she had cut adrift and she was indescribably lonely.

She sat down on the inevitable imitation Récamier sofa with its chill, scratchy, lace antimacassar and picked up Fleet who looked, she thought, as incongruous in Paris as she felt!

Saria came in and told her with a kindly smile that the bath was ready.

Fleet retired into obscurity at those dread words, but Caro rose with the gladness only those who have endured five hours of French coal dust and the conversational society of their fellowmen can know.

If Paradise is reached, as we are told, over the roughest roads (a most distressing reflection and one which must for ever mark it with prejudice for all bad walkers) Paris has likewise an onus attached to it for

Londoners by reason of the wearisome journey necessary to attain it.

Rita strolled in from her own room as Caro was released from Saria's ministrations.

"Let's go and dine at Fouquets," she suggested, "out of doors—it's a divine night."

In the taxi, rushing apparently towards a furious death, Caro began to feel less lonely.

Fouquets was full, so they drove back to Ledoyen's and were conducted to a table close beside the white lattice-work railing behind which the Bois stretched away, a dim fairyland of interlaced shadows and of flickering soft lights, with the stars caught within the highest branches of the trees.

Rita ordered the dinner, she liked ordering and did it so well others enjoyed this exercise of her pleasure.

Like most women who do not live in their own country, she knew a great deal about every other, and knew a great many people without knowing them well.

To-night she nodded to one or two women, spoke to a man who jumped to his feet as Caro and she passed his table, and now, in answer to her smile, Cosmo Luard came up and greeted her.

Caro had known him for years; he was in the Diplomatic, and was still true to the accepted type, even after the war: languid, thoroughly unself-conscious, nice-looking in a fair, nondescript way, and of charming manners.

"Where are you off to?" Mrs. Tempest asked him vivaciously.

"I don't quite know. Some haunt of gaiety, I expect, but it is duty not pleasure with me to-night."

"You work overtime," Rita assured him gaily, "you look it, Cosimo mio!"

Luard's nice light eyes laughed.

"Chip me as much as you like, I have been working extremely hard this week. I have His Excellency

Hamid el Alim to amuse, and I have seldom been kept so long between the shafts. The chap has the physique of a Hercules and the curiosity of a little boy."

"Where is he?" Rita inquired interestedly.

"Over there, at my table, the big man with dark hair. Shall I bring him up? May I?"

"Do. But tell us first who is he——"

"And what? That is more vital. His Excellency is, *tout court,* Young Egypt. We helped him to this power by insisting on educating him at Eton and Balliol. If we'd left him alone in his glory and powerlessness he'd now be a potentate after our own heart and his, and no trouble to anybody. We grafted on to his Oriental indolence the power of energy, the value of restlessness, we took his hashish dreams from him and presented him instead with the vision of a new world! Behold him now, watched and watchful, and Egypt fluent between us. Hamid is dangerous because he has added to cultivated cleverness the shrewdness which is his native heritage, an outlook quite unhampered by any scruples about such trifles as honour, friendship! An impulse to bite the hand held out to help him would seem to him to be one, which to indulge, would be most natural, if by so doing he could further his own cause, if the hand, metaphorically speaking, hindered his progress. But he is an interesting being. I will fetch him."

He went off, and came back accompanied by one of the largest young men Caro had ever seen, and one of the best-looking.

He might be a potential firebrand, but that he possessed qualities other than those of a Jesuitical nature, dedicated to the advancement of his country, became obvious as he talked.

He seemed a composite person; he had an air at once young and mature; his skin, of a faintly tanned colour, was unlined, but his extraordinarily dark blue eyes, set between thick, short lashes, held in their

depths that faint, faint contempt which those of Eastern blood seem to keep even in mirth; it is a look which suggests knowledge tired of itself and of any new subject which may be brought for its assimilation.

Hamid had a boy's mouth, often laughing, extremely good teeth, and thin, beautiful hands, which, despite the very visible predilection of their owner for manicure, gave no effect of effeminacy but one of nervous virility. On his left wrist a gold bracelet was locked, and he wore pearl studs, of value as obvious as their unostentatiousness.

When he spoke he gave evidence of vividness, he made slight yet expressive gestures, and his remarkable good looks added to any attraction of speech.

He stared very directly at Caro when Rita and Luard were talking together, one stare she "felt," looked up and met, and realized, as she did so, that, to her annoyance, she was blushing deeply.

At once, quite frankly, without removing his eyes from her face, Hamid said:

"Madame, to look at you is like looking at a flower, a sunset, a jewel, something quite beautiful and perfect."

He spoke the last words with very polite finality, as one enunciates the closing sentence of any impersonal explanation of an interesting fact, rendering by one's decisiveness argument, comment, unnecessary.

And yet, somehow, meeting his aloof glance, Caro was reminded irresistibly of a worldly, amusing remark of her father's:

"Be extraordinarily aware of the man who says definitely personal things very openly! There is a certain deliberately assumed frankness which is more insidious, and advances a man's cause more effectively, than any secret whispering beneath the rose!"

Hamid's last speech came within this category; involuntarily she smiled, and instantly his smile flashed out, ingenuous, disarming.

"Are you so happy you smile at your own thoughts?" he asked.

So happy! His words brought bitterness into Caro's mind for a moment, she was transported to London again, John was pleading with her . . . resolutely she forced her mind back to the present.

She said hurriedly:

"How long do you intend to stay in Paris, Excellency?"

Hamid shrugged his shoulders.

"As long as I am amused; no one stays longer unless he is a fool, do you think?"

The look of contempt in his blue eyes seemed to deepen, for a moment he became very Oriental, a fatalist bored with everything, then suddenly his whole face changed, lit up, he leant forward impulsively.

"Madame, you ride, I am certain! Do ride with me to-morrow! I have the very horse for you. I will send him round to the hotel to-morrow, yes? The mornings, quite early, about eight, are exquisite, so young, so clean, the asphalt having its face washed, the trees still dewy—or are not trees dewy? Anyway, all things are delightful, as good as new so early! Say you will come."

He coaxed like a child, laughing again.

"Say you will!"

"I think I should like to," Caro said. "I will see. Mrs. Tempest and I are here so short a time though, you see. We leave very soon for Italy—then on to Egypt—and Heaven knows where else!"

Hamid opened his hands, then shut them closely again.

"It is fate, of course," he said quite gravely, "that you go to Egypt, my country. I do, too. Very soon. We shall meet, and I will show you so much. Of course, it is fate that we meet to-night, first—and later on, who knows? Ah, what I can show you in Egypt!" He was staring at her be-

tween narrowed lids. "You have read so much, have you not? Oh! I know, yes, of course! And heard so much? There is the lure of the desert, and always a camp fire 'smelling to Heaven,' as Americans say, and natives chanting eternally 'Allah il Allah,' and praying to the sun, and begging ceaselessly! I know all you think, you see! All about the sky which is always blazingly blue, and the stars golden, and the heat iridescent, and the Nile a gleaming snake between her banks! Egypt—that is all you hear, that *is* Egypt, as seen by hotel guests from Shepheard's, or a Cook's car! And behind this Egypt, as the tourist describes it and the novelist defames it, and which most people believe is as I have said—as though England were Westminster Abbey, Madame Tussaud's, Land's End, and the Thames—lies the Egypt I will show you, teach you, the Egypt whose very dust is scented with romance, the Egypt which swayed the world by subtlety, by beauty—oppressive, brilliant, exhausted, yet eternally magnetic——"

He broke off abruptly as Luard turned and looked interrogatively towards them.

"Let us go and dance," he exclaimed. "Ciro's? The Ritz? Perroquet's? Where you will——"

He swept them from their quiet corner, closed in by white trellis work and pink geraniums, and whirled them along the Bois in his car at an insane speed.

"I adore it—pace," he said to Caro who was beside him, "and power! Listen!" he opened the throttle and the car seemed to shoot forward on silk, the speedometer showed sixty.

"One does this in Egypt in a night which gives a sense of swift power too—big, immense—here everything is like a toy, there is no space. . . ."

He seemed to find space sufficient in which to dance untiringly, however, on a very crowded floor indeed.

And he danced amazingly well, as big men so often do.

Curiously, he talked not at all whilst dancing.

Rita was tired, they went back fairly early to the hotel.

"His Excellency Hamid el Alim is a decorative young brute," Rita remarked, yawning over a last cigarette. "Cosmo was amusing about him. D'you like him?"

"I don't know. He is a new type. I like his looks, his youngness."

"He is nearly thirty," Rita commented dryly, "at least twenty-seven, I believe. His career at Oxford was meteoric, I hear."

"He's going to show us Egypt as she is."

"*Is* he," Rita exclaimed. "Caro, what luck." She had reached the door and nodded affectionately: "Good night, my dear."

Caro began to prepare for bed leisurely after she had gone, Saria was long since asleep. She dawdled unconsciously, it was one of those nights when, in spite of all effort, it is difficult to "get on" with things, though one feels irritated with one's own slackness, lack of concentration.

At last she was ready, and she switched off the lights and stood at the window which was flung wide to the soft cool air; the Place Vendôme stretched before her, austere, spacious, beautiful. She thought of Hamid and his complaint against the smallness of Paris; now, within herself she felt stifled rebellion, not against place, but against personality; her own, from which she could not escape, John's, which had marked hers indelibly.

A flotsam and jetsam of ideas jostled on the troubled tide of her mind. After all, as her father had said, at the end of this wander year, what then—definitely?

Complete freedom?

Was anyone ever free? Love itself was a bondage more exacting than legal ties, any requirement of convention.

The requirements of convention brought her back to Hamid, who, so Cosmo Luard said, ignored everything which crossed his wishes.

Leaning idly against the white-painted shutter Caro wondered what she thought of Hamid; all her ideas of Egyptian notabilities, she confessed to herself with a faint smile, were coloured, really, by the descriptions of them in books, in which, invariably, they were suave and harsh, dominant and childlike at once: Hamid might possess all these diverse qualities, but in no other way did he ally himself with fictional characters.

He appeared to be very much like every other young man in fact, just what he might have been expected to be, Caro decided, since, indubitably, whatever nationality any man happens to be, given certain advantages of birth, money, outwardly at least, he is of no distinct nationality; everyone, all the world over, who has travelled, lived, possessed people who in their time have also done those things, has a surface similarity. Hamid probably bought his clothes in London, he spoke languages as a matter of course, not as an achievement, he played every game there was to play, and knew politics; in short, he was of the leisured, moneyed, accepted type, his sole distinction, perhaps, his superb physical fitness.

A noise made her turn with a violent start, Rita stood just within the doorway.

"I couldn't sleep either, after all, so I came along. Have you some Evian here? I can't find any in my room."

She poured herself out a glass and came across the big room slowly, a tiny, ghostly figure; her dressing-gown was of palest lemon colour actually, but in the reflected lamplight it looked white, and her thinness, her short hair made her seem more boyish than ever.

"You ought to be asleep, you know," she said, curling up in a huge arm-chair. "Why aren't you?"

Then, without waiting for an answer, she went on directly in her low, odd voice, "I am not inviting a confidence, I do not wish one. I know only too well the next-morning antagonism which always follows the opening of the heart's flood-gates between two friends! It's curious, isn't it, how one panders to one's own weakness and then blames the other person for having let one! But you do, you know. I have even known women tell people things they didn't *want* to tell them, because they suffered from a momentary overwhelming self-pity, and gave way to it. How long do you mean to stay in Paris?"

The abrupt change of conversation did not disconcert Caro, she was used to Rita's swerve of topic; someone had once said Rita's mind was like a telephone switchboard, but she herself pressed the button.

"I don't know," Caro said to her slowly. "Shall we see the plays here and then go on to Geneva, and over the Alps from there, or under them—but let's do as much by car as possible—time doesn't matter."

"All right," Rita answered.

She rose and moved about lightly, singing a little under her breath, glancing occasionally at the still, slender white figure staring, staring into the night.

Rita sang just a very little louder, just sufficiently loud to serve her end, which was to bring Caro back from that land of dreary surmise where she wandered.

"Good Lord, what a curse men are," Rita communed within herself, breaking into Prudhomme's *"Ici-bas":*

> *"Ici-bas tous les hommes pleurent leurs*
> *Amitiés et leurs amours. . . ."*

Caro turned her head. Rita's heart-shaking, adorable voice began to exercise its sway.

"She's awfully young, too," Rita went on thinking. "Heavens, what a combination!" And she sang divinely:

"Je rêve aux baisers qui demeurent toujours."

Caro had come farther into the room. She did not speak; she went on listening, and a little of the ache in her heart and mind escaped in tears the darkness hid.

It hurts horribly to want to cry and not be able to. Rita had known or guessed that, and she sang now a little song in English about trees and water. It rippled through the room, touching loneliness like a caress.

Women do not make good friends, in spite of assertion and much written discussion, but it is possible for two women to have a friendship as fine as a man's, to know loyalty, honour, and love for one another, to respect each other's silences no less meticulously than each other's speech, to permit freedom without question: such a friendship is possible, but it is rare.

Loyalty, to most women, means only telling a few chosen souls some secret. It is seldom the one-idea'd, one-visioned thing it is in actuality: and women resist the lure of sympathy so badly.

"They fall for it every time!" Rita told herself with Canadian contempt. "Tell a woman she looks fragile, over-tired, and she's off! Another word of pity, and you and she are drowned in an overflow of confidences!"

She was a woman of few friendships herself—of endless acquaintanceships. Caro she had judged to be too much of her time and type to allow personality; she was so youngly married, so easily pleased, so intensely occupied in enjoying herself. Then a nearer scrutiny had quickened Rita's *dilettante* outlook. Caro's unconsciousness of her own loveliness—rather, her unaffected acceptance of it—her power of refusal (one few women ever possess, and which, when it is theirs, they generally cripple by their own vanity), and lastly, her poise under humiliation, her

gameness which had no flamboyance, her wound which, visible to all, she endured without appeal, changed Rita's flickering interest into a stream of clear flame; and, suddenly, they had become friends, and, coupled with that awareness, Rita had realized that in her love there was a maternal element: she longed to heal Caro's hurt.

It had been she who had first spoken of travel, without reference to any special reason. She had said she was tired of London—could not Caro arrange to accompany her on some tour or the other, preferably a long one?

It had meant the rearrangement of Rita's life, a whirlwind of planning, but they had left on the day first chosen.

"The only loss which sometimes pays is the one you cut," Rita affirmed.

Now, at two in the morning after the Channel crossing, she was deadly tired, and the heart's anguish—any heart's—seemed of small moment compared to bed and sleep, and even the noblest impulses weaken before that need! She crossed to Caro, bent and kissed her, and, being human, sighed with relief as she escaped to her own room.

There is one irresistibly redeeming feature about the griefs of others: they are not one's own outside the door.

CHAPTER VI

"*Le savoir revenir est une des grâces de l'âme.*"—BALZAC.

A GLOW swept through Caro as she walked down the hotel steps the next day. It was such a heavenly morning, golden, clear-cut; the horses shone bronze, the cars gleamed a dozen colours, and the greyness of the buildings against the sharp blueness of the sky was a delight.

She walked alone.

"Of course to get a hat!" a voice said behind her. She turned and saw Hamid el Alim, distinctly one with the morning, his flannel suit ornamented with a Gloire de Dijon, his hat tilted back a little from his smiling face.

"He is good to look at," Caro thought, seeing him now in the strong sunshine, admiring in an impersonal way the splendour of fitness evident in his every movement, the extreme clearness of his eyes, even the whites of which were blue, she noticed now.

"Let me come too," he begged. "I am good at hats, I assure you!"

"I believe you — without assurance," Caro answered.

They talked easily as they walked, halting at every shop nearly until they reached "Jeanne's," a little place in a little street, Caro's special choice.

There were no girls of studied attractiveness, and not very many hats. Mademoiselle Jeanne supervised things herself—a dark, heavy woman, giving an odd effect of opaqueness, with interesting eyes, the suggestion she was many things she did not seem to be.

She welcomed Caro genuinely. Hamid looked on, his apparently indifferent gaze noticing everything, his interest real despite his languor. Hat shops intrigued him for the moment. He had the true Eastern indolence which accepts all things and allows itself to be amused with most. Also, he definitely liked watching Caro trying on hats: she had beautiful hair, alive, thick, radiant, the sort of hair which makes every hat a possibility, and some a triumph.

To-day was apparently a day of victory. Caro emerged into the little street wearing a hat which suggested Napoleonic flamboyance tempered with subtlety. It was black, and had an emerald green "'*chou*,' or '*clou*,' or whatever one likes," she told Hamid. "It doesn't matter what it's called, it's the colour that counts."

"That is clever of you," he observed reflectively. "Always you should wear something green, for your eyes' sake, to emphasize their beautiful greenness."

He said it in an impersonal way, and Caro thought:

"Another 'open, intimate remark'!"

She glanced up between her lashes at Hamid's face: it betrayed nothing save casual interest in the very charming scene before them.

His next remark, however, was rather startling.

"I had no idea you really had a husband."

"Really had a husband!" Caro echoed.

Hamid opened his hands with a quick gesture expressive of impatience.

"He is not with you—Mr. Cleveland?"

"No, neither is Barry Tempest."

"But he is often not. He explores—he does not rank in the husband question, but apart—his type is unusual, that is why. But Mr. Cleveland does not explore, and you are alone."

"Rather obviously."

The faint rebuff in her voice, intentional or not,

made Hamid swing away from the subject. When he spoke next it was to talk of Egypt. He finished with the assurance, and a glance out of long eyes:

"You will understand."

"Why do you say that?" Caro asked. "I may fail your hopes miserably—one can never tell what one will feel about a place. How often you meet people who adore Paris, and how often those who hate it!"

"Very true," Hamid agreed imperturbably. "It is historic, is it not, that even Paradise can be boring! But I think that that boredom was a question of companionship, not of appreciation. If you have a little mind you will see in Egypt only its mistakes, its ugliness: it is all little minds ever see in human beings or places. You will have a Cook's view of it, and you will buy a picture postcard of the Sphinx and think the hotels expensive, and that all natives are beggars. The majority, yes, but theirs is no beggary; it is effrontery of exploitation! Beggars would not flourish if the public did not encourage them! We who know them have their respect, and we in turn respect their skill. But if anyone comes to Egypt who has understanding it is haloed in mystery, steeped in allure, perfumed with the essence of the ages, distilled from the pungent, living earth, which is fed from the tombs of centuries, drawn from the Nile which ran crimson with the blood of vanquished emperors when all the world was Egypt, and she ruled civilization, gave it birth. Little dynasties go on, go out—before time counted Egypt was; when time has ceased, she will be. She is the eternal mistress of the East, inscrutable, dominating, seductive, passionately alive beneath her languor. No one has conquered her, and for ever nations fight for her. It is that Egypt I will show you when you come."

They had been standing before Cartier's window, and it was only then, as Hamid ceased speaking,

Caro realized that fact. His swift picture, drawn with an unerring sweep, had lit her own mind to absorbed interest; now, as the colours faded, she returned to a sense of disturbedness, and the conventional knowledge she might be conspicuous.

Indecisively she said:

"You—I can't express easily what I want to say; I shall sound unconvincing, I know—but your picture is wonderful, Excellency—it——"

Rita's voice greeted them, and Caro felt a quick relief from the strain of the moment Hamid's impassioned recital had occasioned. It seemed out of place somehow to be stirred, influenced, before lunch, in the Rue de la Paix!

"You have not got very far," Rita observed gaily. "You are neither of you, one imagines, over-tired with walking! Oh, but you *have* been intent on business—I wronged you—a new hat, and a dear."

"Isn't it?" Hamid agreed. "Especially the '*chou-clou*' or whatever one likes to call it!"

His brilliant, smiling eyes challenged Caro's, invoking a shared memory, a tiny intimacy between them.

Rita said vivaciously:

"Well, let's celebrate the hat by taking it to the Café de Paris for lunch. I am starving. Even the best hotels, like so many of one's wealthy friends, have one special meanness; that of ours is withholding butter. It ought to know better. This miserliness would spoil my day if I hadn't a nature above petty things. You'll note I have, and only mention this deliberately, in passing! Let us walk on, and go where every prospect pleases and butter is *ad lib*. Caro, you must have risen with the lark!"

She talked all the way to the restaurant, but behind her gaiety her mind was exploring a new line of thought, and one which perplexed her.

Like countless English women, to her every man of any other nationality was of inferior type, what-

ever his qualities, whatever his successes. Rita would never have married any foreigner, for the simple reason that, in her mind, from the moment of their meeting, she would have entertained a prejudice against him, quite a pleasant one (if such a thing be possible!), and one in no way resultant upon his appearance or behaviour, but due solely to the accident of his birth: he was not British, therefore he was unsuitable, and at a disadvantage. Her outlook was inherent and entirely definite, it made Rita no less charming, but she came to such *rencontres* wearing a little inner armour which was impenetrable.

Most of us don our inner armour in protection of some personal idiosyncrasy or the other, most people of any individuality at any rate, and not a few women share this opinion of Rita's. Rita could not assure herself that Caro was a participant, and a very faint anxiety was born that morning within her.

She studied Hamid across the luncheon table attentively, allowing him his good looks, a certain charm, and disapproving of him all the while.

He was, or appeared to be, ingenuous, he was certainly adroit, he had nice boyish manners, and was delightfully clean——

"I'll give him a little talk about John, who, if a poor thing, is English," Rita decided.

She waited until Hamid had directed the making of the coffee with a gesture and one word, then she said:

"I hear Mrs. Cleveland told you we hope to go to Egypt, Excellency, and you were kind enough to offer to show us round a little? My husband may join us there. You have never met him, have you?"

"I have only so far had the interest of hearing of Mr. Tempest," Hamid said deferentially.

"Yes, Barry's in the enviable position of being known by nearly everyone, and only having to know the people he wants to!" Rita said. "He'll be

awfully glad to have a cicerone like yourself, Excellency; it is indeed luck."

"For me," Hamid slipped in instantly.

"For both. I don't want to brag, but I think my husband is interesting. And speaking of husbands, Excellency, when were you up at Balliol? For you may have met John Cleveland there, he was the athlete of his year?"

"Indeed, how splendid," Hamid said politely. "No, I do not think I met Mr. Cleveland," he looked at Caro, "I should have remembered the name, had I done so."

"Oh, you would," Rita assured him, "and his looks and fame. Sport is a tremendous thing with us, y'know."

"Of course," Hamid agreed perfunctorily.

He rose rather abruptly a little later, made his adieux, and disappeared.

"Fine type," Rita said, lighting another cigarette. "Interesting too. Cosmo Luard says he is the only politician of the younger set who counts at all."

She praised Hamid generously.

Caro said at last with a little laugh:

"He can order quite good coffee!"

They shopped through the afternoon, buying things they did not want, with that eagerness which seems to fall on women the moment they arrive in Paris, and is only tempered by the realization of a very reduced account, coupled generally with the presentation of the hotel bill.

Later, they went to call on a friend of Sir George's, a Madame de Rone, whose husband was in the Government, and whose only son was branded with the insignia of the extreme party of artistic youth; all its members were under twenty and over eighteen, and all, be it said in their favour, were genuinely gifted, and more gifted than they would ever realize in possessing parents who indulged them, because they had no intention of losing influence

with them; a two-fold blessing, the latter half of which was, of course, unknown to the recipients.

Madame de Rone had charm, tact and philosophy; she welcomed Caro for her father's sake, and Rita for her own; Raoul's appearance, his immediate appreciation (a phase of his creed!) of Caro's looks, resulted in an invitation, couched in terms of delightful formality, to take tea in his room, which was a Chinese affair on the opposite side of the landing.

Music and art vied with one another in its narrow precincts, the tea was excellent, the cigarettes Raoul's father's, the party at once a gay and serious affair.

Someone sang an extremely modern song and Raoul, at his mother's suggestion, "to provide the contrast," sang after it, with delightful gentleness and genuine artistry, *"L'heure Exquise."*

Then Rita sang; the candles were lighted; Paris murmured far below, it was an hour of sheer charm, clear, happy eagerness of expression, an hour which youth alone can give, and when youth must be delicately understood to be able to make its offering.

Caro felt an odd little stab of loneliness; she was, of the women there, nearest these boys in age, and yet how immeasurably removed from them by experience, they were at the beginning of everything, she at the end.

They were "going on" all the time, she had nothing to go to now.

A sense of chill despair settled on her as she and Rita drove home, yet she could not speak of it.

"And if I could, what would it avail me?" she asked herself, half-contemptuously. "What does it ever avail you? You can win sympathy, yes, but if that is going to comfort you, heal your wound, then your need must be very superficial!"

Hers was still the egoistic belief of youth that anything usual, anything the rest of the world knows, participates in, must, because it is universal, be of no value to a particular cause; and pride, pathetic,

pardonable because it is so obviously the result of lack of experience, was like a steel wall about her heart, making the expression of sympathy an offence.

Rita suggested a theatre, and she assented idly; it was something to do at least, and with the weariness which follows on a long day after a long journey, Caro had reached that state of restless tiredness which craves excitement as an escape from self.

There was a pile of letters for Rita, none for herself, and as she entered the corridor which led to her room she felt the loneliest being on earth. She opened the door upon a vision of mauve and golden orchids, and Saria, standing back to admire her handiwork.

"Here's a card, ma'am," Saria said, holding out a sealed envelope.

Caro tore it open; above his name Hamid el Alim had written: "I could only find these flowers, they are not half beautiful enough."

"I never have seen such orchids," Saria was saying almost reverentially, "they make you think, I declare I don't know what they *do* make you think of!"

CHAPTER VII

"*Some toil, some reap.*"—EURIPIDES.

IN his flat in the Avenue Henri Martin, Hamid lay on a couch, dictating to his secretary, a young Greek, whose mother had been an Egyptian, and whose ambition, first and last, was money; he served Hamid el Alim because he paid extravagantly, believed in his cause, and would, so Zachilinos hoped, when he should attain office, effect a modern translation of the biblical promise regarding sparrows, and see that this particular bird, himself, was provided with an enviable ledge from which to enjoy life. He had the small-spirited man's contempt for all headlong, high-souled enthusiasm; it "got you nowhere," it produced no wealth, it was a silly luxury and it irritated those of sober mind to watch good money poured out in its indulgence.

Zachilinos had despised and disliked Hamid el Alim from the day he had entered his employ; his dislike had been strengthened, rather than lessened, by the fact Hamid had lifted him from poverty and misery to affluence and ease of life: his was that nature which cannot forgive an obligation, and snatches at generosity, when it is unneeded, lest another should receive benefit. As a worker, Zachilinos was admirable, he had the meticulousness of the little brain, the orderliness of the parsimonious, which never wastes its own, and wants unceasingly what others have, and he possessed that most excellent thing, a natural and trained memory.

Telephone numbers, addresses, names, appointments, insignificant details were meat to Zachilinos,

his spiritual drink was provided by the absorption of Hamid's private correspondence. It may be said safely he had more knowledge of Hamid's love affairs than that practised amorist himself; no note was too insignificant for Zachilinos, not only to treasure but to schedule and transcribe, no trouble too great for him to go to to track down any appointment of which he was uncertain.

In appearance he was slight, dark, had melancholy eyes, and eyelashes of a consistency which suggested carpet thread.

He kept a sister (because she was an orphan and he had to) in strictest seclusion, and at the cheapest school, an old woman who ran his *garçonnière* (Xavier's sole concession to his inherited instincts) looked after her during her brief holidays in the same friendly way a gaoler would attend to the wants of his prisoner; like Xavier, Andrea was lithe, furtive, self-contained; unlike him, she was *dévote*, and her brain was harmless.

Odd as it may seem, Xavier's only genuine affection was for his sister, and it was disinterested until he came to the consideration of her marriage, which he hoped would be profitable for himself.

He was always on the verge of speculating largely, and doing it nigglingly, and then cursing his own cowardice when the venture proved successful.

To-night he had invested a hundred, and it had brought him in three, and he was in a state of seething ill-temper because he might have laid out a thousand and had not done so.

He surveyed his employer under his eyelashes as Hamid paused in his dictation to search for the words he wanted.

Xavier's feelings translated themselves into silent contumely.

Damn fool, lying there in a dressing-gown which had cost a hundred pounds—who cared what he said to the Party—the Party only wanted him because he

was rich; if he—Xavier—were rich, God, he would see life! He conjured up visions of plush-fitted suites, of money to burn—or keep—as pleasure dictated, of the hold he would obtain through money—and possibly Andrea should marry the French bank clerk then—if he would take her without a *dot, bien entendu.*

Hamid's voice broke in on his thoughts:

"I beg to enclose my subscription—what *is* my subscription, Zachilinos, to the Irrigation scheme? Look it up, will you?"

Zachilinos did so, it was five hundred pounds half-yearly.

Hamid nodded, asked for his cheque-book, wrote the cheque.

"Damn fool!" Xavier registered once more against him. "More excellent money thrown away—down a drain—a good joke that!"

"Register it," Hamid said, tapping the letter.

"Very good, Excellency," Xavier replied. "You will require me further?"

"You might put on a fox-trot," Hamid suggested idly; he took a cigarette from a very ornamental box which had his initials on it in diamonds, and lit it; Xavier had calculated each cigarette Hamid el Alim smoked cost about fivepence of English money; he himself always annexed a certain number from a freshly opened box, he considered smoking money a sinful pastime, he felt it to be less heinous when he shared the crime.

For half an hour he stood beside the gramophone changing the records and entertaining socialistic views. Hamid lay on the couch, his dark head banked high with a tangerine-coloured cushion, his feet, in scarlet slippers, resting on another; the hundred-pound dressing-gown was of dark, very thin, figured silk; curiously, despite his attitude of repose, the rhythm of fox-trots and Bostons, Hamid's face was neither restful nor amused, it was absorbed, tense.

His valet, an Arab, who looked boyish but was older than his master, came in with a bundle of papers, and with a glittering smile laid them on the smoking-table beside the couch.

Hamid tossed amongst them till he found what he wanted, then flung out the *Times*, and read in it swiftly, his lips moving very slightly over certain words, his eyes narrowing and opening. Finally, he lifted his head and said to Xavier:

"A riot at Kadufa; the Loyalists subdued it! Loyalists! Hassan must be there. Perhaps——" Impatiently he sought without moving his head to find the ash-tray. Asra, his servant, took the long, half-smoked cigarette from his fingers and crushed it out. Hamid continued to stare before him, tense, half irritated.

"Give me a calendar," he said suddenly.

Xavier fetched the silver-framed one from the writing-table, and Hamid jerked the lever up and down, checking dates in each month and, as he decided, giving them to Xavier to note down.

"Where am I going to-night?" he asked Xavier abruptly. Xavier consulted his engagement pad.

"You are dining with Monsieur de Rone at eight, in his home, and supping with Mademoiselle Gaby after the theatre. There is also a reception at the English Embassy."

"Yes, I know that. Ring up Raboun Bey and ask if he could see me about eleven, before the reception—say I would call on him. Wait; get me the number, and I will speak myself."

He took the receiver and spoke into it clearly, in English.

"Hulloh, Doctor! Yes, it's I. Could I come round and see you—to-night—before the reception? Good. About eleven, then? *C'est ça!*"

He put the receiver back, nodded to Xavier:

"You can go. Register the letter, won't you? Got anything to do to-night? There are a couple of

seats for the Capucines, better use them. That's all right. Good night."

Xavier left the room. Hamid yawned widely, stretching so that his magnificent chest split the dressing-gown.

"Oh, damn!" he said, then laughed, and burst out into Arabic, gesticulating as he talked.

Asra took the dressing-gown from him, and watched whilst his master began to do his evening exercise. He was himself a big man, but he was big and slack, or seemed so, and Hamid appeared less tall than he was by reason of his perfect symmetry.

The Arab smiled as he watched him; he had been Hamid's body-servant since his boyhood, and he was proud of him.

When the fifteen minutes were half gone he went into the bathroom and ran on very hot water, and flung into it handfuls of jasmine bath-salts. The flat was drenched with hot, steaming perfume, which seemed in accord, somehow, with its appearance.

Whilst his master bathed Asra put on the record of *"l'Oiseau de feu,"* standing by gravely watching the rotation, unamused, but interested. Hamid sang in his bath an odd chant. He had once adored *"l'Oiseau de feu,"* but now he was tired of it, and sang to drown it.

He caught up the record as he came in and broke it, laughed at his servant's face, lit a cigarette, and said composedly:

"You can buy more."

"Everything is as my lord wills," Asra answered, touching Hamid's hand to his own forehead, then kissing it.

Hamid made no answer, the remark required none, but his face stared back at him from the mirror bearing still the outward expression of his sentiment —complacent, ruthless, half amused.

CHAPTER VIII

" Quiconque a beaucoup de témoins de sa mort, meurt toujours avec courage! "—VOLTAIRE.

RABOUN BEY, a scientist of note, who had attained honour both in Paris and London, was habited extremely modestly in an *appartement* in an unfashionable quarter.

Hamid drove himself there, his big Rolls flashing and gliding at Parisian pace.

He entered Raboun Bey's sitting-room as the clock struck eleven; he had had an amusing evening, an excellent dinner, and some good music, and his host's suave discretion had flattered his sense of power.

Raboun Bey rose to greet him. The only child of a Frenchwoman and a Turk, he had an entirely French appearance, that of the savant, benign, imperial-bearded, spectacled, a little rotund, a typical figure from *"Je sais tout"* when it eulogizes one of its celebrated contributors.

"Ah, mon ami!" he said, taking Hamid's hand.

He rang a bell and told a French *bonne* to ask Mademoiselle to be kind enough to attend."

"How is she, Mademoiselle Fari?" Hamid asked pleasantly.

Raboun Bey bowed ceremoniously.

"I thank you, my little girl is well."

As he spoke Fari entered. She was very slight, with very dark eyebrows and eyes and hair, and her face, what could be seen of it through the yashmak which she wore, was magnolia colour; her eyes, gazing above the strip of tulle, were immense and

beautiful, and gay, the yashmak gave an enchanting demureness to her somehow, a suggestiveness which was tempered with sheer innocence.

Hamid did not touch her hand, but he conveyed warmth in his conventional greeting.

Long ago, his father, Hassenein el Alim, had made up his mind about Fari; both Hamid and Raboun Bey were aware of his decision, but neither would speak of it yet, and, just as Hamid knew almost to a piastre the extent of Raboun Bey's vast wealth, so was Raboun Bey, in his turn, equally cognizant of all Hamid's doings. Both respected subtlety, device, and suave deception, both were (a far stronger bond, perhaps the strongest of all between men of personal and national ambition) locked together in their sympathies, the young Turks, young Egypt, were necessary to each other, alone either must struggle, co-ordinated both might attain success.

Fari prepared coffee with slender, pale fingers, and with eyes which strayed constantly to Hamid's face. He and Raboun talked in Arabic, occasionally in French; they spoke of the rising at Kadufa, its value to their own cause. Hamid drew from his pocket his list of dates, and together, he and Raboun, initialled the list, each number with one letter. The letters signified the possible riots on that day, and the towns where they would take place.

Hamid said reflectively:

"To-day I paid my half-year's subscription to the E.I. scheme; I hold now two-thirds of the shares. A strike, a big water strike, would carry us far, Raboun Bey."

"In time," Raboun agreed gently; "at present it would be suicidal. Action, without power to continue that action, is madness. Half the employees, despite your shares, engaged upon irrigation schemes are Greeks, all the overseers, save Mahmoud, Englishmen. We will foment jealousy amongst the

Greeks, and draft in gently, Nubians, our men, and we must arrange so that the English do not find the outlying stations healthy. That should not be difficult, hein?—and then we replace them with picked men of our choice. Once we control the points of the star the centre can be forced."

"The whole country is either senselessly agitated, and therefore useless from our point of view, or else so slack it does not care," Hamid said discontentedly.

"A little starvation, an epidemic, rouses even the most somnolent," Raboun propounded quietly.

Hamid shrugged his shoulders, his eyes flickered with exasperation.

"It is farcical," he said coldly, "this baiting for success, when, if the people had sense, could be made to listen, they could obtain so much for so little——"

"It is no use crying for an electric drill when you have only a hand-gimlet to work with," Raboun said inertly.

He stared at Hamid between puffy eyelids. Years before he, too, had chafed at inaction, the ineptitude of oblique action; his anxiety and fret, and expenditure of energy, had won him precisely nothing; to-day he realized the value of time, of suggestion, of an infinite taking pains; his heart sympathized with Hamid, whilst his mind derided him.

He had never cherished Hamid's aims, nor had he done so, would he have had the least chance of attaining his desire.

Hamid intended to become first President of New Egypt; he had been trained in the idea, bred for it, his father's wealth was enormous, his family influences immense; he had been educated in England and France with one end in view, the acquirement of knowledge which should further his cause.

And so far he had repaid a hundredfold the care and endless money lavished on him; he had become *persona grata* at many English houses of value, from the point of view of young Egypt; he had twice

played a card in this game of chance between countries, which had gained for him the winning trick; the war had necessarily affected the cause, and perversely it had at once given it new power, by its inculcation of republican spirit, and had frustrated that power by the increased grip on the country necessitated by the war.

Then the war had ended, and the unrest had ripened; now it was a burning growth, which unless it were cut out would, sooner or later, break in the violence of its fever.

Raboun, looking still at Hamid, thought again of his own interest in him; of the possibility of his only child's marriage with him. He knew Hamid was attracted, he knew his inbred, unquestioning obedience to the paternal wish; Fari's like or dislike did not count, but Raboun considered it fortunate that Hamid should be, in her life, the Shining Prince of the Thousand and One Nights, and that she should have found personal favour in the eyes of old Hassenein el Alim: had she not, her position as the daughter of himself, a girl who had received every benefit of Western education under rigid Eastern surveillance, would have gone for much in point of sheer suitability with Hassenein el Alim, who had remained, in a world of change, unchanged.

He was of the East, a type of inimitable Orientalism, greedy of his religion and in accord with its tenets of stark simplicity of life, despite his vast wealth.

He had his faith, his harîm, his business, his ambition, and each in turn must serve the other.

He had suffered profound dread for Hamid when he had sent him to England to be educated, but his prophetic sagacity, his grasp of the needs of young Egypt, which could be served only by a man of Egyptian birth, who had studied Occidental methods, had impelled him to make this great personal sacrifice.

Throughout Hamid's absence, he had never been free from the fear of Western women; patiently, persistently he had had Hamid spied upon, the information that Hamid had been impressed with Raboun's daughter had eased his mind of a weight of wearisome anxiety.

His own hatred of England was fanatic and discreet, a dangerous combination, and one which rendered him a formidable ally and which, linked to the trained and disciplined revolutionary creed of his son, became a very potent force.

Raboun Bey was cognizant of every characteristic of Hassenein el Alim's; he had carefully weighed up the value of this old man's savage hide-bound outlook, and he had less respect for it, because it lacked control, than for Hamid's lightly contemptuous treatment of the situation which, he considered, lacked sufficient impetus.

His own life had been a long training in subordination; in the early days his father, in common with many outside and influential traders, had had power. British rule had first weakened it, then, very unostentatiously, removed it.

The loss of money has seldom an ennobling effect on human nature, illogically enough, least ennobling when the lost gains have been won illegitimately! Raboun Bey's father, exiled, impoverished, had cherished a lifelong grudge against Western ideas, Western rule, and he had seen to it that his only child shared those views.

Raboun had been educated in Berlin, Paris and London. In Berlin, he had been given an official post in the big State laboratory; as a bacteriologist he had won European fame; his marriage to a Frenchwoman had given him influence in Paris; her early death had been a blow to Raboun's personality no less than to his career.

Throughout his life he had been the secret servant of Turkey and Egypt, the Turco-Bulgarian war had

brought him a certain affluence; the great war had made him, and sealed him definitely in the cause of Egypt; Turkey was too poor to be of use to him any longer; the future held every hope of a successful coup in Egypt.

He had two loves, money and his daughter, and no genuine adherence whatever.

He was quite aware that he was much suspected, and derived mild pleasure from the knowledge; suspicion in nine cases out of ten bred fear, and for the inspirer fear is an incalculable asset in any campaign.

Only Hassenein el Alim had faith in him, and that was because, much in the same way as a famous *danseuse* cherishes the slipper in which she first won success, so Raboun, from purely sentimental reasons also, clung to the easier tenets of the Moslem faith, thereby making Hassenein el Alim believe him a fervent co-religionist. After all, one had to have some faith, when one was in the pay of a country which fought under the banner of Al-lâh!

To the old Sheik, therefore, he postured and lied; between Hamid and himself, however, there was at least religious truth; Raboun had keen intuition, and he was very aware that in Hamid's at once hard and subtle soul his religion was locked; he might have become amazingly European, but he was in all essentials, however deftly concealed, his father's son and the son of his forbears; his mind might be brilliantly veneered with civilization, his soul was Oriental; as he sat now, lounging back in a low chair, in ordinary dinner kit, one narrow, silk-clad ankle gripped in a nervous hand, something in the sinuous ease of his attitude, in his very build, the angle of his head, made it possible to imagine him in the kuftân, the Eastern turban.

Generally, to picture any man in any type of special dress is to raise a faintly ridiculous image in one's mind, for the simple reason that your European

type does not lend itself to decoration: it is at once self-conscious and too shy and too proud, and it has no fondness for anything unusual, or, at least, considers the unusual either unpleasant or ridiculous.

Every nation "dresses up" better than the English; the further south one goes the more decorative the transformation, because the more natural. It was quite possible to imagine Hamid in the dress of a Sheik and to allow at the same time an acceptance of dignity and beauty in that imagining.

He looked up suddenly now from erasing the pencil marks against the dates and met Fari's eyes, and at once smiled from under the slender dark arch of his brows.

Beneath the yashmâk a glow of faint rose showed, Fari's eyes laughed enchantingly above.

"Would you play to me?" Hamid asked, "play and sing?"

She did not answer in words, but went at once to the little, cheap, upright piano and sat down at it.

She played well and showily at first; then, forgetting her desire to impress, began to play as she felt.

Her choice of music was florid and hackneyed, "Cavalleria Rusticana," the "coloured" Italian operas; she sang the famous songs in a very sweet soprano, too throatily, but quite truly, the yashmâk fluttering above her lips like the ghost of butterfly wings hovering over a scarlet flower.

Suddenly she looked round, her eyes sought Hamid's, claimed them, she struck a bass note and then, swiftly, with unerring precision imitated the beating of a drum with muffled sticks, and at the same time broke into a staccato chant.

She swayed as she played with the inimitable Eastern movement of the body, alluring, sensuous, inviting.

The song went on and on, monotonous yet exciting because of its continuity, its relentless insistence on one thing. Hamid sat forward, his eyes shining, his body tense, his mind lit by the reflected glare from the fires he saw in memory, fires flickering in the desert, their aromatic scent stinging his nostrils; the cheap, dry, little room became a burning vision of flaring night-blue sky, points of golden flame shooting up to it like stars, the savour of cooking hanging hotly in the still air, the hoarse and metallic cries of the Nubian slaves jangling with the snarling of the camels, and a tent, white, scarlet-lined, and within, himself and this girl, singing still.

* * * * *

The song ceased, he gave a great sigh unconsciously; in the street just below a taxi hooted discordantly, someone in another flat was coughing distressingly.

Hamid rose to his feet. He bade Raboun good night in Arabic and then crossed to Fari. Neither of them spoke, they looked at one another, both smiled, Hamid lifted her hand and kissed it and went out.

As he walked towards the actress's flat he thought of Fari as his favourite wife—perhaps—it mattered little—his only wife? With her he would be able to talk and play too; he knew he could not tolerate for long the heavy sweetness of a purely Eastern-bred woman: he could admire one, love her in a way, but fifteen years of European schooling had left an indelible mark; he considered himself lucky to have found this girl of Eastern sensuousness and Western veneer.

He was not madly in love with her, but she pleased him greatly, and in any circumstance women, even those a man passionately desired, adored, were but trifling events in the great passage of his life

He was acclaimed by Mademoiselle Gaby with kisses and flowers, she wore his latest gift—a ruby of worth, and danced on the table for him; she was very gay, and noisy, and not quite sober; she put champagne into the sherbet Hamid kept for himself at the *appartement,* he watched her antics with flaccid amusement, a bored toleration; she was so much coloured, made up. . . .

At a tangent, force of contrast, his mind went to Caro.

He forgot Fari and Gaby.

And his mind bungled this new impression, he could neither classify it nor dismiss it. Yet Caro suggested something to him, a something which lay just over the borderline of connexion in his mind.

She was very English, of course, with her fairness and clearness, her effect of frailty which hid silken strength. . . .

In a flash it came to him : she was like a beautiful Arab racer, *sang pur,* untamed. His mind caressed the image he had created, he was pleased with it because it linked his world and this Englishwoman's —his country and hers.

Abruptly he got up and said he must go home.

But when he was free, alone in the streets again, with the first breeze of dawn whispering coolly to him, he did not walk in the direction of his home; instead, he turned north by the Seine and strolled along the *quai.*

He never knew fatigue in its dull sense, his physical strength was magnificent; he was tired only because he chose to be, when he wore himself out with sport, he had always lived the native life in Egypt, which encourages violent pleasure and simple appetite. Hamid had both; he could become at will an ascetic the better to take, to gratify a passion : as a child saves the sweetmeat on its plate until

the last, enhancing its pleasure, stimulating its anticipation.

The sun was pouring over Paris when Hamid went in; his windows were all open, and yet a fragrance of incense hung about the place.

He counted his small change carefully, yawning whilst he did so, slid between the sheets and was asleep.

CHAPTER IX

" Kneel, sun, to clothe her round about
With rays to keep her body warm;
And, kind moon, shut the shadows out
That work her harm.

" Yes, even shield her from my will's
Wild folly—hold her safe and close!
For my rough hand in touching spills
Life from the rose."

—THEODORE MAYNARD.

IN their sitting-room Rita was playing, trying over some Renaldo Hahn songs, and contemplating Hamid dispassionately between each song.

Quite frankly, and in her extremely private mind, she did not like the young man; to begin with, he was not British, not even European, indeed, but Oriental, and, to go on with, a necessary sequence, it seemed to Rita he must therefore be crafty, full of guile, and unstable; all Eastern people were, their instability being one excellent reason why the British have to rule for them. Further, they were of ungrateful tendency, as proved irrefutably by their constant, silly, little insurrections which forced Britain to keep up expensive armies solely to control them!

"How on earth Caro *can*," Rita communed within herself.

And yet, even she had to confess, that whatever Caro "could," or could not do, in point of fact she did do extremely little.

It was impossible to know whether she really liked Hamid or tolerated him with interest, as so many women do tolerate young men of courtesy and attractiveness. Rita was the last person to believe, because a woman was interested, she must be intrigued by a

man, definitely attracted to him; her own career had allowed a good many men-friendships, did so still—

But not with Egyptian Sheiks. . . .

Only, of course, Hamid el Alim was, in a way, so disarmingly un-Egyptian, un-Oriental, so much more an Oxford man, keen on diplomacy, sport, a *flâneur*.

"Well, thank Heaven, anyway," Rita decided with amazingly perverse morality, "Caro isn't free, and won't be in all likelihood. And surely this hefty young Bedouin will soon have to hie him to his native shores——"

With happy indiscrimination, or perhaps to belittle him—because she neither liked nor trusted him, Hamid became diversely in Rita's speech to Caro a Bedouin, an Arab Sheik, an Oriental, or a Nubian—in moments of annoyed and gamin-like abandon, a "coffee-bean"!

Rita was aware, Hamid made her aware somehow, very cleverly, that he knew she did not like him, and subtly, exasperatingly, his knowledge forced her to feel in the wrong; it implied a discourtesy of mind, a smallness, and she writhed under it.

"When do you leave for Cairo, Excellency?" she asked him suddenly.

"Quite soon, Mrs. Tempest. And you, when shall you arrive in Egypt?"

"I don't know," she shrugged her shoulders, humming an air under her breath, striking an occasional note to get the correct pitch, "our plans are rather in the cherry-stone state, this day, next day, some time, never! I want to loiter through Italy, anyway. I adore it!"

"After loitering in Italy let us hope you will adventure in Egypt."

"That sounds important; my description of Italy, our stay there, had insouciance, your suggestion of our visit to Egypt holds mystery."

Hamid laughed suddenly, his teeth gleamed extra-

ordinarily white, his whole face looked very boyishly, mischievously amused.

"You will allow my poor country so little, you even resent its being mysterious! Ah, wait, Mrs. Tempest, you do not know!"

Rita laughed too; she admired Hamid's almost uncanny intuition, which was, in this instance, rather like the intuition of a vain and beautiful woman who feels her beauty challenged, and she knew herself childish in her quite uncalled-for dislike.

Frankly, charmingly she said, ceasing to play and practise:

"Honestly, the thought of Egypt intrigues me enormously. I have been to Cairo, Harnak, Thebes, the usual places, of course, but I have never seen, and always longed to see, the desert as you promise to show it to Caro and me."

"And the Nile," Hamid said gently, "you must have my dahabeeyah and drift up it—the stillness of the tomb seems to hang in the blazing sunlight sometimes, and at others there is the frenzy of primitive emotion——"

In Rita's eyes her half-amused amazement must have shown, the glibly usual corollary to that astonishment—"it must be the new cocktail!"

Over Hamid's face, like a veil, reserve dropped, he had had a definite purpose in exploiting his own earnestness, he had recognized the second it had lost its appeal; Rita became, in his opinion, crassly ordinary, banal, valueless. And yet, though he respected her for nothing which was intrinsically hers, her shrewdness, honesty, fidelity, he paid a certain appraising homage to her vast wealth, her complete disregard of it, her genuine and fine knowledge of so many beautiful things which also interested him, because part of his own fortune was derived from them. The bargain-hunter in him, the connoisseur, met Rita on equal terms. As a woman, he disliked her ardently and with contempt; his mind paid no regard to her

save as she might, by her dislike of him, impede the fulfilment of any plan he made for the cultivation of his friendship with Caro. He took his cigarette case of leaf-like thinness from his pocket and offered it to Rita; she always refused his cigarettes, he invariably produced them; he knew Rita felt irritated by the formality and therefore he persisted in it.

And he looked at her imperturbably, with his "Eastern look," as Rita told herself, unconsciously envisaging in her mind an immobile dark figure with inscrutable gaze, her real conception of an Arab.

Caro came in, clad in primrose colour, and Rita noticed with a feeling rather like dismay that Hamid's gaze had still that aloof fixity in its depths which she disliked.

What on earth *did* Caro see in him? Perhaps nothing; after all, she merely talked and laughed with him as with any other man of their circle who took them to theatres, dances, the usual round; he saw Caro very rarely alone.

He had come now to lunch with them and was to drive them later out to Versailles, into the woods beyond; a small café (which was noted for its foie gras) was the object of their journey.

"I love the stuff, but really is it worth it—having to study Hamid's back head for forty kilometres?" Rita asked herself irresolutely.

She brooded a sudden attack of neuralgia which should be cured miraculously in time for the opera that evening.

Then looking up, quite by chance, she saw Hamid gazing at Caro's unconscious profile.

He was standing very near to her beside an open window, and for one second all his defences were down, he was unconscious of observation, he had forgotten its possibility.

Caro moved, Rita turned away.

She had studied Hamid's full face for one second,

she was now determined to study his back head for the afternoon's drive.

And to warn Caro?

So often a warning quickened an innocuous interest into something more vital, something dangerous.

"A warning to some women is as good as a declaration," Rita meditated, "with some temperaments, of course. With others—I am inclined to believe it would be with Caro—it is an offence, a forcing of a barrier—and no real friendship allows that. I will not warn, we will move. Some form of action or another I must adopt. Heavens, why did I never recognize the ever increasing responsibility a married woman, living apart from her husband, is to anyone who truly loves her? A baby is a trifling thing, inconsiderable to the *n*th degree, in comparison. You put it down, or take it up, it may even have convulsions, but a hot bath cures them: playing chaperon to a married woman is one long convulsion of one's mind, and no bath cures it!"

She burst with élan into the quite impersonal loveliness of an Hungarian song, perfectly aware Hamid was longing for music which should intensify his mood, or at least mingle with it. This soldier chant was gay and garish, heedless, and passionless, a thing of village halls, of laughter, and cool drinks.

She finished it, rose, and closed the piano.

"And that's that," said she, sauntering forward to the little balcony, silting her long string of pearls between finger and thumb.

Hamid laughed gently.

And quite suddenly, staring at his serge-clad figure, so enviably broad of shoulder, narrow of hip, his blue-black hair guiltless of grease, thick and shining, his flawless grooming, Rita hated him.

Her hatred began on that early summer day in Paris, with the Parisian world hurrying to déjeuner, the sunlight fluting into the room, the flowers aglitter

like pale lovely jewels, Caro herself a summer blossom—and it continued through her life.

She sat behind in the car, it was a heavenly afternoon, vivid coloured, young, an afternoon such as she adored, and she tried rather pathetically to lift her thoughts entirely clear of Hamid and the problem he presented; hatred when it is real, is by no means an easy sentiment to entertain, it does not add to the gaiety of life. Rita forced her thoughts away from it, and in searching for some magnet sufficiently strong to keep them attracted, was reminded by a glimpse of winding road, of her visits to Harrow, of a turn in a lane just like the one which had been passed.

The memory of Tim was like a very cool soft wind blowing into a heated room.

It was Saturday, too, *the* afternoon of the Harrow week when parents had special value.

Rita never missed one Saturday, she drove herself down generally, accompanied by Tim's nurse, accompanied in her turn by Tim's dog, and food of every variety for Tim's cupboard. As soon as she had to change down on the long hill, Tim's retriever dog, James, began to grow excited; it was he who saw his master first amongst hundreds of sauntering blue-coated, straw-hatted boys, it was also James who ate half the strange and wonderful tea which followed, a tea beginning with toast and fried eggs and ending with banana-fool and ginger-beer, topped perhaps with a sausage roll.

James, like his master, had a catholic taste, and went in for everything.

Then they all strolled about the funny winding streets, or sat upon the terrace where Rita could smoke and Tim pretend to, and where, from a great distance, the haze of London showed and a train ran past, looking like a toy. Then good-bye, and Tim racing to the car with socks to be mended, packed in a paper bag.

It was little consolation to Rita at that moment, with Hamid's sleek, well-shaped head before her, to remember that Mary, armed with socks, and chicken and cake and stamps, was speeding out to Tim!

Her thoughts circled about parenthood, and reached Sir George in their pilgrimage; no help need be expected from him; Rita could see the half-quizzical, half-aloof look in his chill blue eyes should she confide her anxiety to him, she could almost hear his pleasant, undistressed voice say: "My dear little lady, why worry? No one of us can control another's destiny, you know, and if we could, what a tedious affair! Arranging other people's lives may be amusing, but it's so profitless!"

Her own father had been of the type which ordered, accomplished, and knew no subtlety.

"No hanky-pankying now," he had said bluffly to Rita, "either you like a man or you don't. Let the ones you don't, quit. The father who keeps a dinner list for incurables, deserves all he gets, later."

If Sir George had taken a definite stand about John, four years before, would it have availed anything?

Rita doubted it; a youth which has received no actual moulding, no definite tuition, and has been the recipient, indeed, only of worldly advice, half-cynical aphorisms, does not take kindly to sudden dominance; rather, the education it has received, tends to weaken belief in any power save its own will, own wishes.

The car stopped before a little hotel, which had a veranda where nasturtiums twined, green painted iron seats and tables, and an awning in red and white; the host, a Frenchman of portly build, pale, sharp-eyed, kindly, bristled forward; he took Hamid's order and vanished, his voice could be heard breaking the afternoon stillness in the distance.

There was a long wait and in it Rita nearly fell asleep on her green chair.

Caro and Hamid wandered into the road where the hedges were white with summer dust, and the shadows lay black and slender from the tall pine trees opposite the café.

It was extraordinarily still in the little copse into which they strayed; Caro let her cigarette fall on to the pine needles, and in an instant a scented, vivid green flame leapt up, sank, died out, its dying breath sounding distinctly in the hot silence.

"I love scents," Caro said lazily, "every kind, gorgeous, prepared essences, and wood-fires, with their queer, haunting cottage smell—and every flower, and the keen fragrance of grass being cut, and the odd, dusty odour of soot and lilac and—and tar that means London in Spring-time—— Isn't it amazing how scents connect events in one's mind? More than any other thing, I sometimes think. I never hold a spray of freesia against my face without being a little girl again, waiting in the convent room to see father for the first time after I went to school. There were freesias in a white jar on the table.

"And I never smell violets without thinking of Sarah Bernhardt. I was fifteen, and she was playing 'La Dame.' Dashing away from scents for a moment, how intensely *sounds*—the timbre of someone's voice matters, doesn't it? All my life I shall remember Sarah singing as she arranged the flowers after her quarrel with Armand, and trying to seem as if she didn't care a bit, and all the while she was dying—aching to go to him and be friends again! All my life I shall remember the passion and tenderness, and *raillerie* in her voice as she said: '*Mon trésor, mon amour, ma vie!*' I was fifteen, and I had scarcely ever been to a theatre, and of course had no right to see 'La Dame' at all, but I did; Heaven and an aunt were kind, and I never slept for three nights afterwards! The waking hours seemed to count so little, for the sound of that golden voice fluted through them like a refrain. *La divine Sarah*

left at the end of the week, and I bicycled to the station. I had immense difficulty to get away, and I'd scarcely been out in the streets alone, but I reached the station, the platform, and I saw Sarah. I had saved up, and I had a huge bunch of violets, and with an effort of courage I shall never equal, I pressed forward to the window and offered them. Sarah was standing there, looking at the crowd. She had on green things and green kid shoes, and her green eyes looked at me and smiled. I suppose I seemed too gauche, too schoolgirlish for words, but perhaps my eyes didn't. She took the violets and kissed them and then gave me a loose handful back. '*Souvenir affectueux,*' she said in the voice I had heard in my heart ever since that first time. She was my first love, and for me she 'set the world in violets' indeed!"

As she half turned to go back to the little café out of the cool, jade shadows of the wood, Hamid said suddenly:

"Do you not think we might sit here for a little while; it is so hot under the veranda, and Mrs. Tempest sleeps, I think. Here—see," he knelt and ran the pine needles through his fingers, "dry and smooth as silk. Sit here. Wait."

He had slid out of his blazer with one movement, it seemed, and had spread it for her; a smooth tree trunk formed a back. Now he sat cross-legged before her in another movement, smiling at her boyishly.

"This is awfully nice."

"It is."

"And cool."

"It is."

They were both laughing.

"And shady."

"It is."

"And if you love speaking voices, so do I. Yours."

He leant forward to light her cigarette for her,

and in that moment, for some obscure reason, perhaps because of the direct personal note in his last remark, perhaps because of his college blazer, his very boyish look in his white shirt and flannels, Caro thought clearly how English he seemed; that thought allowed her to consider him more intimately. Somehow, as if his intuition told him this, he went on swiftly:

"Of course you know, so many people must have told you, what an adorable speaking voice you have. It has on me the effect of scent and sound—and, as well, another effect——"

He spoke as he usually spoke, his own voice was rather soft, and he spoke slowly always, but now, however, the slow softness seemed as if some other note vibrated also—a note of force held in.

Caro felt it—she said rather quickly:

"Speaking voices do matter, don't they?"

"When they are beautiful, yes. And beautiful voices are always cruel. They promise so much more than they mean. And there are some listeners who dwell on each tiniest inflexion. For them the beautiful voice can make a see-saw of their hopes and fears."

"A cruel see-saw?" Caro intrigued. Her eyes laughed at him.

To her surprise the blood ran up in a dark wave under his skin. He said almost petulantly:

"I mix my metaphors, I fear. You are amused. However, I have not quite failed in life if I but serve you as a jest!" He jerked his head back as if challenging her. His eyes narrowed in that unreasoning anger which arises so often from that "misunderstoodness" to which passionate and vain natures are so liable.

"Excellency!" Caro murmured, she felt suddenly that this nothingness of a discussion had become ridiculous.

She looked across at Hamid and smiled, and rose.

"We must go back, Rita will think we are lost."

She was steadying herself for a moment against the tree, and as she half turned her foot slipped on the glass-like carpet of needles. She saw Hamid spring up, and then, in that same moment, it seemed, so incredibly quick was he, she felt his arms about her, and the warm pressure of his hard, strong body against her own. She had the strangest knowledge of hard coolness in that second, and yet of ardentness, for Hamid's heart beat through his thin silk shirt, through the laces and silk of her own things almost as if it beat against her very self. And flamingly her thoughts fled to John, the only other man whose arms had held her, who had longed as this man longed, she knew (however she would deny that knowledge later), to make her passionately conscious of himself.

She freed herself very gently.

"Thank you so much for saving me—the needles are so slippery," she said conventionally, but her voice was breathless from that close embrace, and it shook on the ordinary, polite words.

For a moment Hamid did not answer—then he laughed very softly.

"The pleasure was mine," he said.

Still smiling, he bent to pick up his coat, then knelt on one knee to free Caro's suède shoe from some burrs; his dark, bent head was below her heart, she could see his neck, the way the thick, shining hair curved down on it, like a little boy's hair, to a peak. His warm fingers were on her foot; she could feel their touch through the white suède. . . . He had amazingly wide shoulders, a splendid breadth . . . the white silk shirt strained over them . . . he was a very lean, hard person—amazingly fit. . . .

He looked up at her, still kneeling.

"*Madame, c'est fait!*"

His arms were open, he had simply to close them to fold her to him, his head upon her breast, and keep her powerless.

He did nothing, but his longing pulsated in that moment like a speaking voice.

He rose, pulled on his blazer.

"You are ready?"

They strolled back to the little café, and after a while coffee came, excellent and hot, and a plate of early fruit, and finally, packed in newspaper, a tub of the precious foie gras.

As the patron presented it, offering it with as much *empressement* and benignity as though it had been a baby on its pillow ready for the christening, a man rode out of the wood and dismounted rather stiffly in front of the inn.

Of course, Rita, Caro, and Hamid el Alim looked at him, and as impersonally, his gaze met theirs, was about to swerve, when it quickened, his whole face lit up, as he stepped forward, his horse following him, and bowed to Rita.

"Signora Tempest!"

Rita exclaimed "Giovanni!" delightedly. With real pleasure in her voice she turned and said to Caro: "The Marchese Sforza! A great friend of Barry's and mine, the brother, too, of that Arab-Englishman, Robert Essex!"

She ran on at a great rate, talking as she always talked when interested in her subject, picturesquely rather than literally; now from her quick sentences the others learnt all about the second marriage of the Marchesa, Sforza's mother, about Sforza's own career, his travels in the desert with Barry, his riding in the Grand National, his palace near Venice. . . . !

At last she stopped, and then asked him almost reproachfully:

"But why are you here?"

Caro had been looking at Sforza, she had thought, as she had watched his amused eyes, whilst Rita had been talking, that they, too, might have been listening, so vivid had they been, so keen.

Now, as he talked, explaining in answer to Rita's

question, that he had inherited a property near the forest which he intended to cultivate, Caro studied him more closely. He was a man with an air of distinction rather than good looks, she decided, or, at least, he would only be good looking when he was animated; in repose his face was too thinly cut, too aloof, and his manner at moments emphasized this quality.

Yet he had an arresting personality, Caro acknowledged, and in some indescribable way, which she could not in the least define, he suggested to her mediævalism.

"It is because he looks so much like some famous portrait of the Renaissance period," she decided. "He has the same thin eyelids, and fine, close nostrils, and faint lines about his lips—he is not nearly as tall as Hamid, but he could be as strong, I believe."

Sforza himself broke into her meditations; it seemed he had met some of John's people. He looked at her very directly whilst they talked together, but almost at once Hamid el Alim joined in, and there could be merely open conversation.

Sforza had a débonair yet chill gaiety, save when he talked with Rita, when his voice, his manner, was warmer.

He asked Rita's permission to call, and rode off just before the others left. It was evident he was a fine horseman.

Rita turned to Hamid vivaciously:

"You know the Marchese's half-brother, Essex, Excellency?"

Hamid scarcely hesitated at all; he said tranquilly:

"No, I regret, Madame. One has heard of him, of course."

And to herself Rita said: "Now, I wonder, my excellent Egyptian friend, why you troubled to lie about so immaterial a matter?"

She herself talked of Essex, who had been the only child of a wildly romantic union. The Marchesa Sforza had met Lord Essex at a ball, had danced with him, and promised to marry him; for each it had been a second marriage, for each an ideally happy one. Essex had broken his back out hunting two years later, and the Marchesa had lived but a little longer. Sforza, then fourteen, had taken charge of his small half-brother, had trained him, adored him, lived much in England for Robert's sake.

When he had been eighteen Robert had gone to Egypt for a holiday; he had never really returned, and at twenty-eight he had become, to many people, a figure out of the Arabian Nights. Stories were told of his wonderful camp in the desert, of his prodigious recklessness for the Arabs, of their love for him, and of the feudal services he received from them; in ten years he had learnt seven dialects, and had become indistinguishable from an Arab. The Foreign Office had found his integrity and knowledge invaluable; he was perhaps the most solid menace to young Egypt's iconoclastic aspirations.

Rita said slowly, her eyes on Hamid:

"How extraordinary you have never met!"

"And how unfortunate for me!" Hamid supplied suavely.

* * * * *

Sforza called at the *appartement* a day or so later and found Rita alone.

He talked charmingly and sincerely of Barry and Tim, of Rita's interests; it was Rita herself who introduced Caro's name.

At once, Sforza gravely:

"Your friend is very beautiful."

Rita was startled, almost dismayed, and in one circle of thought she knew she did not want Sforza to suffer, she urged herself not to be idiotic, and she tried to believe she had leapt to an extremely far-

fetched conclusion: Sforza could not be in love with Caro, the idea was absurd.

Yet—in his voice——

She looked at him closely; he was leaning a little forward, searching for his cigarette-case, his other hand rested on the arm of the chair, a ring gleamed on his finger, and with sudden inconsequence, Rita, noting the faint glitter of a device on the ring, remembered that Barry had once told her Sforza's quarterings included a skull crowned with roses. Barry had said (rather a stretch of imagination for him!) that, to his mind, the skull symbolized something inherent in the Sforza character.

"They've always been a merciless, splendid, profligate crowd, mad about beauty," Barry had concluded. "One of the reigning lot has always chucked away his life for a belief, in a duel, or for a cause—or for nothing save dare-devilry!"

Rita, looking at Sforza, wondered if beneath his armour of fine irony, and courteous nonchalance, that spirit lived?

She began to talk of Caro quite naturally, of Tim, and Sir George, and she touched with sure, yet delicate touch, on the reason for the "wander-year."

"I see," Sforza commented quietly, and he added: "I knew Mrs. Cleveland was not happy. One sees it in her eyes."

Rita could not help saying:

"Giovanni, you seem to have studied Caro rather closely!"

Sforza was lighting a cigarette; he looked at her, the match cupped in his hands, its reflection throwing up sharply the fine irregularity of his features, the steady darkness of his eyes.

He said:

"I wish mine might be the right to do so. I could desire no better fate."

Caro came in just then, accompanied by Hamid;

the two men nodded to one another; Sforza left very shortly.

When Hamid too had gone, Rita said:

"How those two detest one another!"

"How absurd!" Caro answered; she seemed about to continue her sentence, hesitated, said finally: "Sforza is not in the least that type."

Rita began to play, and her thoughts ran with the notes, "Sets the wind in that quarter! Heavens, the inconstancy of the unattached and disappointed! The inconsistency! If Caro could be free and marry Sforza, what a glorious chance of happiness both would have. He is all she needs: he has real mentality, he is alive from his head to his feet. He has seen everything and been everywhere—he could give her a wonderful life—and I would wager," she crashed out a magnificent harmony, "that Hamid el Alim would never cross their threshold!"

The next day Tim, released from durance vile at Harrow, arrived, and necessarily Rita thought less of Hamid and Caro.

Sforza came often, his "beautiful hostility" towards Hamid, as Rita called it to herself, providing her with a wicked enjoyment. Hamid was quick, Hamid was shrewd, but his was the quickness and shrewdness of cunning, Sforza's of intensive subtlety; Hamid often spoke with indirect disparagement of the Italian in such a way his speech could not be criticized; Sforza never mentioned Hamid's name, but he talked with him to his disadvantage.

"Sforza evinces rather a partiality for Caro, I consider," Tim remarked, tying his tie before his mother's glass; meticulous in speech, Tim was equally meticulous in attire, "affairs sartorial," as he would have put it; whoever else in his family or entourage might fail in the nice recognition of the conventions, it would not be Tim.

To-night he intended to be extra decorative; Sforza and Hamid were both dining, and, as he

finished attaching his father's platinum watch-chain, which he wore with the gay heedlessness of youth, recking not of fragility or value, he offered passing comment on the fact that the very newest of dinner jackets sported bone buttons, and not those of braided effect. "Possibly you have noticed that?" he suggested to his mother, "it is a detail, of course, but one must recognize that accuracy in detail is, in itself, distinction."

Rita assured him she would give the matter her earliest consideration; she looked up into his face, he was nearly six feet tall at fifteen, and very broad, his serious face looked down into hers, a man's face save for the beautiful innocent eyes, now preoccupied over the latest thing in dinner jackets, and the curling boyish mouth, almost a child's.

She put one small hand either side his face and drew his head down.

"Kiss Muv," she said gently.

He put his arms round her and kissed her as boys do kiss, in rather a preoccupied way, and not very lengthily.

"My tie straight?" he asked immediately afterwards.

"Perfectly," she assured him; perhaps she smiled a little wistfully.

Tim suddenly flung a close arm about her.

"I say, Muv, you look simply ripping—sweet——"

"So do you!" she assured him.

He laughed with her, bent and kissed her again, and returned to the looking-glass.

He spoke as from a distance, his voice still preoccupied.

"Y'you know, Mother, Sforza must have a jolly good tailor, in spite of being Italian."

"In spite of being an Italian, he gets his clothes where Daddy does!"

"Really," Tim exclaimed—his self-possession was

never shaken—"Ah, that explains his advantage over his own countrymen, doesn't it, besides being a tribute to his discrimination! I say, I must go, you told me to get out some wine."

He chose one of his father's best handkerchiefs, thrust it into his cuff, admired, for one last fleeting moment, the "set" of the platinum watch-chain, and departed.

Rita could hear him a moment later greeting Sforza, as Tim himself would have said "mellifluously" in his very best manner, which was in truth a charming manner, and combined extremely young dignity with a great desire to make his guests happy.

His clear voice came to his mother.

"Ah, Marchese, good evening! Do sit down. This chair is quite passable. A cigarette? A cigar? Excuse me one moment whilst I tell my mother you are here."

He called up, then returned to the salon and the murmur of Sforza's voice, speaking English, became audible; he was responding to Tim's hospitality with grave punctiliousness. Tim liked him greatly, and gave him boyish respect, partly because Sforza met him on his own level, partly because he appreciated his wit, though it was often directed against himself, for Sforza took Tim off delightfully; he was wont to affect the use, solely for Tim's benefit, of three syllable words, and Tim was intrigued, and in his heart flattered. He had no atom of *gêne*, and would discuss politics with Sforza, sport, the government of countries of which he had barely heard, literature, with equal gravity and freedom. Indeed, his freedom of speech was quite unrestrained, and he admitted his likes and dislikes with bland and disconcerting frankness.

Hamid el Alim he detested.

"He's 'too' everything," he said with that boyish irritation which is so unappeasable, "too

well dressed, too glib, too beastly pleased with himself. I can't stick him."

Rita tried to influence him.

"Darling, one mustn't encourage unfounded prejudice! And there are three quite long words for you!"

"There's a good deal of foundation," Tim said glowering, "the feller's a mammoth!" He flung round a minute later, goaded to further expression by his mother's gentle effort at persuasion:

"I tell you the chap's not a sport, I don't know how I know, but I do know. What do you think, Marchese?" Tim demanded, with the blessed thickness of youth, which allows any direct question, and blandly expects a corresponding answer: "D'you think Prince el Alim is a sport?"

"Why do not you?" Sforza riposted.

"I don't know," Tim admitted irritably, "but I don't."

"He is extraordinarily able," Sforza said.

"You can be able and a beast," Tim remarked irrefutably. "He is."

Rita strove later to discuss his obstinate dislike with him.

"Oh, Lord!" said the worried Tim, "it's because of his meanness then. Oh yes, I know he's hospitable and so on—*don't* I know it? But he's dashed parsimonious too, and he *shows* he likes winning at poker, and he reminded me I owed him a franc—Mother, one doesn't do that (at least the right sort don't); he may be 'pukka' in the big things, but he's cheap in the little ones, and he kicked Baldi."

This last statement was Tim's clinching argument, Baldi was Sforza's comic little yellow dog, and Tim had seen Hamid kick him aside.

"Stinker," had been Tim's instant inward comment; aloud he had said disconcertingly and violently:

"Kick something your own size," and he had

caught up Baldi, and refused to recognize Hamid for the remainder of the day.

To-night, at dinner, he was very dignified still, and he began a new hatred of Hamid for his good looks.

"He's a nauseating sight," Tim told himself.

He would probably have done Hamid bodily harm had he been present later at the bridge table.

Usually Caro played well, to-night her game was ragged; she was Hamid's partner, and though he played excellently, he was very deliberate always and fatiguingly absorbed in his game.

Caro felt tired of everyone and herself; she was aware of Rita's partisanship for Sforza, and it failed to amuse her, rather, lately, it had seemed to add to the tension she felt sometimes. To-night it was very obvious, and it increased her own nervousness.

She looked wearily at Sforza and Hamid. Her stock consolation when she felt distressed by the homage these men offered her, "I am married, and they know it," failed to yield its usual beneficent influence to-night.

Of course she asked herself the question every woman who senses impending unhappiness for others does ask: "But what can I do?" After all, as she often told herself, she had not desired the friendship of either man, and to neither had she given specific encouragement. She did not deny that Sforza's personality intrigued her, its very restraint had charm. "Why should not a woman have a romantic friendship with a man?" she asked herself, knowing quite well such friendships are either impossible or mere preliminaries.

"Sforza is a dear," she thought and let her manner, quite irreproachfully, tell Sforza her thought.

It is very easy to do this, it only means the sharing of small, innocent jokes, the divulging of intimate innocuous tastes, the merest suggestion a man's presence makes the hour more agreeable.

Of course, she deceived herself, there is no man or woman who does not do so sometimes, when harmless self-deception gives to life a certain new happiness revelation would destroy.

Caro played with fire complacently, feeling that if her marriage had "failed" in its best sense, it still afforded her protection, and here, in this life in Paris, which provided the "fire" of the moment, marriage partook rather of the nature of asbestos gloves which protected her hands from being burnt.

That morning, however, her soothing fallacies had been a little shaken, for John had written to say he would "like things settled," and Caro knew herself faced with certain eventualities.

Ultimately, she would be free.

Once free. . . .

Hamid's voice, acidly smooth, said:

"Then we owe five pounds."

Guiltily, Caro realized how carelessly she had been playing; she dealt with a murmured apology and tried to focus her attention on the cards. Sforza passed, his pleasant, low voice sounded a little tired, Hamid, glancing sharply at him declared two no trumps; in the second round Sforza doubled; with a shock of queer mixed feeling Caro saw Hamid smile, it was an unpleasant smile, nearly a sneer; he drawled:

"I re-double the Marchese's call."

"I re-double," Sforza nodded.

Hamid laughed shortly; on the hand Sforza and Rita made one thousand points.

Hamid had flushed, he said, fingering his cards, addressing Sforza:

"It pays sometimes to hold the cards and pass, does it not?"

Instantly Rita broke in with an edge to her voice:

"Your singleton, of course, was rather dangerous, Excellency, and Caro never put you up, did she?

I dash myself rather—one finds it difficult when one has what seems an amazingly good hand to realize just where skill ends and rashness steps in, don't you think?"

"Or where sport ends and gain is the object," Hamid answered.

He was still staring at Sforza, whose eyes had never left his face, and who showed a line of pallor round his mouth.

No one spoke; then very deliberately Sforza removed his gaze from Hamid, and turned to Rita.

"Shall we go on?" he said. "Your deal, Signora Tempest, I think."

Again he and Rita won, Caro rose.

"I am tired and have played too abominably," she said. "I will go before I become even worse!"

Sforza held the door for her, then he returned to Hamid and Rita.

"If you are ready, Excellency," he said formally. Rita felt an odd anxiety at the still coldness of his voice, it passed, she bade the men good-night; they went out together.

The streets were very still; with a glance round, Hamid walked forward, Sforza kept step beside him; neither man spoke.

In a street which seemed to have no denizens, and which was ill-lighted, Sforza halted.

"I think, Excellency," he said icily, "you were good enough to criticize my play just now?"

Hamid towered beside him; he laughed, now the fret and pin-prick fever were over: he had paid his losses, he hated losing money, save over women, and then there was some return. . . .

He said patronizingly, rather insolently:

"My dear Marchese, I really don't remember——"

"Let this remind you, Excellency," Sforza said, in the same frigid, very low voice; he struck Hamid with his open hand lightly on the mouth.

"I will send you my seconds, Excellency."

He stood quite still for a moment, waiting; the terrific blow which Hamid dealt him over the heart might have killed a less virile man, any man not in the very perfection of training.

For one hideous moment Sforza thought he was going to faint; he had a second's lightning, sickening vision of himself lying senseless at the feet of the Egyptian; by an effort which drained him of the power of speech or movement he managed to keep his feet, to overcome the deadly nausea of faintness; he stood swaying, his lips closed like a vice to silence his panting breath, his throat aching unbearably with the pain of it, but he knew he had only to wait—just a little while—a little while. . . .

He was tall himself, but unnoticeably so, because of his slightness; Hamid el Alim had breadth as well as height; he was drawing out his cigarette case now, and laughing a little, he said in English, the language which had been spoken throughout the evening:

"I wish you a good night, Marchese, and pleasant dreams!"

In Sforza's mind a sentence revolved like a brilliant flash of light.

"Oh, God, let me kill him with my bare hands——"

He leapt upon Hamid the moment his hands were free, and he had put back his case into its pocket.

"You shall fight," he said; and his fist drove like an iron bolt under Hamid's convulsive defence.

Hamid cursed as he fought, months of most luxurious pleasure had not fitted him for the ring, however impromptu the contest, and this damnable little Italian with his friendliness for Caro—his beastly hardness—he longed to kick him senseless; and suddenly he put down both hands and grasped Sforza by the waist, crushing him to him, intending to fall on him. Sforza could have screamed, if he had ever learnt to scream, or been capable of express-

ing pain even in a time of anguish, the grip on his waist was so terrible, he felt as if his bones were being squeezed from their sheath of flesh outwards, downwards, his whole body felt as if it were scorched with suffering, but his head was cold, as terribly cold as his brain was burning, and thought made him lift his fist and drive and drive it into Hamid's face.

And suddenly he was dropped, he spun round helplessly, his arms fighting the air, his chest heaving, his mouth open . . . it was a minute before he realized that Hamid el Alim was lying spread out, at his feet. He bent over him as soon as he could move with less pain, and laid a hand on Hamid's heart: regular, strong.

Sforza straightened himself with difficulty; he stood for a little longer, trying to breathe naturally; then he started to walk home very slowly. He did not look back at the heavy figure prone on the ground.

In his *hôtel* his valet was waiting up for him, a man who had come from the estate, and whose father had served Sforza's father; he was about Sforza's age, a powerful, bronzed young man, who ran Sforza's motor-boat in Sorrento, and was chauffeur in Rome. The big entrance hall was faintly lit, Carletto had laid out some sandwiches and wine; he uncovered the silver dish now with a little flourish, and smiled cheerfully; he had the true servant's pleasure in all he did, and the anxiety to do it well.

Then he saw his master's face, and the smile was swept from his face, as if a towel had been taken to remove a mark.

"Marchesino," he stammered, "you are ill—cognac—here——"

He advanced with the flask in one hand, ready to put an arm about his master.

"Do not touch me," Sforza said with an effort. "I am not ill—I am hurt. A very hot bath for me,

Carletto—as hot as possible—and yes, give me the brandy—— Go now—at once——"

He let himself down into one of the hard chairs, and sat there supporting himself by resting his arms on the arms of the chair. He sat looking before him, as if he were dazed, his eyes seeing unseeingly the high marble walls, the cool shadows, the fruit and silver on the dark table, the lace on Carletto's napkin. . . .

He knew now—he knew—for all time——

And it was no use; it would never be any use.

All his life would go like this, a waste, a stream flowing nowhere, having no bourne. . . .

From the first he had realized that Caro was to be loved, he had not realized until to-night, how.

There had been so many lovely women in his world, he had loved one or two, easily, happily, for a little while, then they had married, or he had gone away—and there had always been his career. He had no longer a career, though it was still there, but it did not count any more.

Nothing counted save the utter possession of this one woman who alone, in all his thirty-eight years of life, he had truly loved.

She had inspired his admiration at once. She was all things he wished a woman to be—beautiful of mind and body, fine in every sense. Then he had pulled up, she was married, there was no question of divorce . . . he must rein in his thoughts; he had striven to do so, for there is no man who knows so well the meaning and dignity of the word respect as your Italian who gives respect to few things and fewer women.

He had schooled himself to be with her, to be able to be, and please her, he had not found it impossible, for he had not understood the depth of his love for her. Hamid el Alim had taught him that; he had recognized from the moment of their meeting that Hamid was attracted by Caro, every fibre in his

own being had attested that fact, and from that attestation had sprung to life a ravening jealousy to-night.

It had been one thing for him to be in Caro's life, and act a rôle; it had become an impossibility for him to continue acting now, when another man had appeared definitely upon the stage.

And he had an Italian's outlook on all African peoples; his fastidiousness was outraged by this Egyptian's open friendliness; his standard of things fitting disfigured by the admission of Hamid to Rita's and Caro's lives.

With his knowledge of his own insane jealousy of Hamid had come the revelation of his love for Caro.

Until that hour he had believed himself in love, accommodated himself to that belief, and drifted; love had never had complete dominion over him, neither had he, if he meditated on the subject at all, believed that it would have. To-night, like a flash of lightning, which strikes down old defences and burns its way devastatingly to an appointed end, the recognition of his love for Caro had come upon him, and before it his former beliefs, views, easy acceptance of life had shrivelled utterly.

He had looked from Hamid el Alim to Caro at the card-table, and had understood how his instinctive jealousy and keen dislike of Hamid had made him aware first.

"I should have known of my love in time," Sforza told himself, his eyes on the onyx sky visible between the pillars. "In time—we were happy—it was the dream time. . . ."

He knew that if he had not experienced that frightful jealousy of Hamid el Alim he would be content still, restlessly content, happily unhappy, in that wonderful state when a lover loves before declaration, before self-admission even sometimes.

But jealousy had swept aside all lovely phantasy,

all dreams, and with one violent thrust plunged him into the glory and misery of a passionate and hopeless love.

There are some people who never love until they are jealous, and then, because others love, out of a sort of spite, because they hate others to have what has been theirs, however lightly they have cared for it; but there is a jealousy which springs into being only through lasting love, it is a jealousy for the happiness of the beloved, not against it, a jealousy which resents only the harmful in life, a jealousy which is more of life than of love. . . .

It was this jealousy Sforza felt for Caro, against Hamid.

He knew Hamid as no woman, as no Englishman either, would know him; he knew him as a Latin knows men who have been bred in a similar climate, yet under what amazingly different auspices!

Of necessity Italians study the Levantine, and his nature is not dissimilar from that of the Oriental a little farther West.

"They have an Italian's spontaneity without his generosity, a Frenchman's greed without his charming cleverness, an Englishman's doggedness without his honesty, and a German's pertinacity without his thoroughness," Sforza had heard a statesman say of them.

As lovers, he knew them to be headlong, heedless, utterly selfish, and of that slow sensuality which is so degrading.

Carletto came back to tell him his bath was ready, he rose slowly, his muscles hurting abominably, his ribs were so badly bruised that breathing was difficult; but he walked nevertheless with pleasure, his lips smiling a little in recollection.

He said aloud in English, remembering the "feel" of his fist jamming Hamid's face again and again:

"It was worth it!"

And when later he lay very still in his narrow bed, his hands beneath his head, staring out again into the soft darkness, despite the pain he felt, he felt as well an abiding and intense satisfaction that he had "knocked out" Hamid.

But in the morning much of that satisfaction had fled, he was face to face with his own distress again, and that blotted out all minor considerations.

He could no longer stay in Paris, he had realized that the evening before; it was impossible, and of course now, since the fight with Hamid, even more so. He felt that to stay near Caro now would be, for the present at any rate, intolerable.

He must get away and try to pull up.

Where should he go?

He sat in the strong sunlight, his pipe between his teeth, trying to think; at his feet, pressed as closely against them as he could, dirtying his immaculate shoes which were Carletto's pride on a summer's day, Baldi, his absurd yellow-and-black dog, a small devoted mongrel, sat gazing up out of beautiful, clear eyes lit by clearest devotion.

Only Tim was fond of Baldi, too, but then Tim loved every dog, all the others, Caro, Rita, even Saria, laughed at him, and Fleet bit him, because Baldi had little spirit, whenever they met.

"He has spirit, but no vindictiveness," Tim would explain indignantly, "or else he's biblical, and in this case, turns the other leg!"

Tim appeared now after his ride, his hair still wet from his bath:

"I say, why didn't you ride, Marchese? Slothful inactivity, I bet! Over-indulgence in the Sybaritic ease of your couch, what?"

Sforza laughed, and Baldi wagged his tail.

Tim picked him up and kissed his yellow head, and Baldi growled with affection.

"Why didn't you?" Tim repeated.

On the spur of the moment Sforza said: "I have had a wire, Tim. I have to go down to Brindisi."

"Brindisi!" Tim echoed. His face had fallen; his voice held dismay. "How simply rotten. We shall miss you. You'll come back quickly, won't you?"

Carletto appeared behind him with Sforza's coffee and rolls, and at once Tim said:

"*Buon giorno*, Carletto. Isn't it simply beastly? The Signore Marchese has to go to Brindisi!"

Carletto's quick Neapolitan eyes sought his master. Without a flicker of an eyelash he answered:

"Si, Signore Timmee, Ma!" And he outspread expressive hands, bowed, and vanished.

"Ma—what?" Tim demanded. "It'll be no sport without you, Marchese." He pulled down a great mass of honeysuckle which hung just above him drooping from the stone jar, and held it against his face. "Oh, damn!" he said.

"I, too, am sorry," Sforza said gently, and he thought, looking at Tim, how he would have loved a son, Caro's son, straight and beautiful and frank, like Tim. . . .

He went on levelly:

"I fear I may be prevented even from coming to say good-bye. I will write, of course. Will you make my spoken adieux for me?"

"What train are you going by?" Tim asked instantly.

"The noon express."

Tim put Baldi down.

"Right," he said. "Addio. I'll be there." Then he had vanished.

Carletto came on to the balcony. His eyes were reproachful.

Sforza said to him:

"We leave at noon for Brindisi. After that we visit Signor Roberto."

CHAPTER X

"There is no loneliness so poignant as that which must endure companionship."—LOTSKY.

"HE is going, I tell you, by the twelve," Tim said breathlessly.

Caro was not up. Rita listened to Tim's distracted story whilst doing her hair. As she listened she was wondering furiously:

"What *can* have happened? Then I was right when I felt afraid last night!"

She went into Caro's room. Caro was still in bed, looking like a little girl. In a high vase orchids flamed pale heliotrope.

"How beautiful!" Rita exclaimed, touching them lightly. She added: "Sforza leaves for Italy by the noon express. He sent a message of 'good-bye.'"

Caro had stirred on her pillows. She sat up, her hair hanging in curls round her white throat and shoulders, her eyes distressed.

"Sforza leaving? But what—*why?*"

"Business, one imagines. Tim and I are going to see him off. Get up and come too."

She held out a white silk stocking.

"Come along; you can cut a bath now, and get it when you come home."

"I can't understand it," Caro repeated.

"Really, my dear, your comprehension—or lack of it—won't hold back the noon express! I'm off, anyway. Will you come? It's platform four, I think."

Caro sprang up as she left the room, but she neither rang nor called for Saria. She stood

irresolute and, illogically, felt cross and hurt. Sforza had been such a dear; just that, just such a dear. The realization he was leaving, without even troubling to come and say good-bye to her, hurt; and it worried her—puzzled her.

These weeks had been so happy—perhaps now that they were ended she realized for the first time how happy—and somehow she had come to depend rather on Sforza—obviously without reason! The hours had held no special value for him, nor her friendship!

Lunch was smitten by Tim's disconsolateness. Rita retailed Sforza's departure. "He sent you *'tanti saluti,'* Caro."

"I can't think why he has to go off so suddenly," Tim lamented.

"Oh, probably business," Rita said briefly.

"I should not have imagined he needed to do business," Tim answered. "His hardly seems a necessitous existence!"

"It isn't," Rita said drily, aware she wanted to defend Sforza. "Giovanni is one of the wealthiest Roman aristocrats, and one of the youngest, and one of the best looking."

"There's that Egyptian coming," Tim announced from the window. "I can see his opulent car. I'm off." He vanished through one door as Hamid el Alim was announced at another.

He had come to suggest an expedition on a lake beyond Versailles.

Rita excused herself charmingly. Tim was absent. Caro, with a little laugh, accepted.

After all, why not?

At least, Hamid wished to please her, and no one else appeared to care!

Every human weakness is both pathetic and humiliating, none more so, perhaps, than that *"laisser-aller"* attitude of mind towards events and people, situations, because one happens to be lonely

or unhappy. Half of the foolishnesses of life would never be committed if there existed a charm to dispel the evil power loneliness, emptiness of interests, exerts upon some natures.

"At a loose end" is a description of a state of being which, in many cases, is a prophecy of a "lost end."

Throughout the long afternoon and evening with Hamid, his unexpressed, yet never absent, adoration lulled Caro's weariness of spirit to rest, soothed her hurt vanity, narcotized her usual quick sensibilities, and she felt towards him that absurd, disproportionate gratitude we all feel to someone who delights to please us when we happen to think other people have neglected us!

It was very late when they started for home after dinner at a little restaurant which had provided the divinest jasmine and omelette.

Together, side by side now, they watched the lights gleam out on the shore as the little motor-boat sped onwards.

"Like golden flowers amidst dark foliage," Caro murmured.

The moon was rising, amber-hued, immense; they two seemed as if alone in all the world—the only sound was the silken wash of the little waves as the boat went forward.

Hamid's voice came very low, scarcely audible:

"In a few weeks we shall meet in Cairo?"

"Yes," Caro murmured.

There was a pause—one of those halting moments when two people are together, between whom there is tension. Then Hamid asked:

"Are you glad?" His voice was not quite steady. Caro felt a sudden thrill; in the pale light Hamid's face looked much younger, it appealed, his eyes implored. Her heart was racing, and yet she felt the strangest shyness, an almost cold shyness which had about it no excitement, only disquietude.

"Say that you are glad!"

Hamid had released the wheel, he crouched forward and caught her hand in both his; she was chill, his hands were vibrant, warm, and in each, as he pressed it down on Caro's hand, she could feel the thud, thud of a hard, eager pulse, and to her shyness a sort of breathless interest was added.

"We—we—I must go back," she said with difficulty.

"A little longer, a few moments more out of your life, together, you and I, here on a golden sea——" The words were caresses, his voice made them so; perhaps, in his hand hers quivered, a note of exultation crept into his voice. "I know—I have heard you will be free some day—I can wait. Have I not waited for centuries?"

Caro moved her hand definitely within his, as if to loose it.

"You must not say these things—nor I listen——"

His answer was a laugh, and the lifting of her hand to his lips.

"Must not—must not," he mocked her gently. "What is there I have said, and done, you can reprove?"

Above her hand his eyes laughed at her, above her palm his lips laughed, and still holding it so, he murmured into it three words, so low no single word came distinct. Then, as swiftly, as finally, he had released her, taken the wheel, spun the boat about, and headed it for home.

He lifted her out, and stood very deliberately holding her so for an instant; his face was in shadow, but he seemed to be smiling; his voice sounded a little amused:

"You will not forget," he said.

He drove her home at racing speed, helped her from the car, stood off from her, bowed, and said formally: "You will make my adieux to Mrs. Tempest and her so charming son, will you not?"

"Why not come up and say farewell?" Caro asked him as impersonally.

He laughed.

"I think I will, Mrs. Tempest loves so to see me!"

But the Tempests had gone to a theatre; the *appartement* was empty.

Hamid turned to go, and half-turned again, then from the stairs he called a last good-bye.

Caro could hear his light steps on the hard concrete, and then later the purr of the engine starting, and finally its rhythmic beat as it sped down the long avenue.

She went to her room, which Saria indomitably had made as English as possible. Fleet, the Sealyham, fell off his little chair and ran to her, and Caro sat down on the couch, one silken ear between her fingers.

She did not know what she felt, the day had been one enervating conflict: Sforza's abrupt departure, Rita's refusal of the afternoon—and this last hour with Hamid el Alim.

She tried to be honest with herself.

"Of course I do not care . . . and men care so easily—anyway—it would all be impossible. . . . One imagines so much more than there ever is . . . I believe all women do——"

And quite definitely her mind said to her: "You ought not to go to Egypt," and as surely she knew that she would; that, if she debated the question, weighed it, even suggested an alteration in the plans to the Tempests in the end, the issue would be the same.

Tim called outside her room, and she answered him, and then, as she prepared to go down, for the first time since her marriage she wished almost despairingly that John and she had had a child. Before, during all the last two miserable years, she had been profoundly thankful they had not, but now, with a great wistfulness, she longed to have someone

who belonged to her so much, was so dependent on her, that their dependence was an anchor in her life.

She had a vision, standing there in the cool yet disturbingly sweet darkness of the night, of the years to be, the problems they must hold; and she asked herself, once faith had been so lacerated, could it ever again be the whole, fair thing which alone can make love endure?

Would she not again distrust? She who now was so unsure of herself?

She rested her head unconsciously on Fleet's, and the touch of that warm solidity, Fleet's leap of appreciation, made her smile ironically. Women who were "left," women whose lives were empty of adventure, generally ended up with a garden and a pet dog!

She rose, still holding Fleet; at any rate, forlorn ladies did not adventure into the desert, nor receive the adoration of Egyptian Sheiks!

From the salon there came the sound of the piano. Rita was playing the opening notes of "Erhebung," and then she began to sing it; unconsciously Caro's mind translated the words into English:

> "And in the dawn
> The roses still shall burn
> With the memory of our kisses!"

There rushed home to her the memory of Hamid's voice, asking out of the perfumed darkness:

"Shall you be glad?"

"*Oh,*" she said, the word resembling a deep sigh; she hesitated another moment, then ran down to the salon, to Rita, questions, light, happy ordinariness, to people whose future was, as their to-day, coloured, content, courageous.

CHAPTER XI

" You are armed with love, with love
Nor all the powers of fate
Can touch you with a spear,
Nor all the hands of hate.

" Lift your arms to the stars
And give an immortal shout;
Not all the veils of darkness
Can put your beauty out."

—JOHN HALL WHEELOCK.

AND with one of those swift transitions which so often cleave into life at some moment of crisis, with the morrow there came Tim's illness.

Long afterwards Caro remembered the feeling, almost of resentment, which had possessed her when she had gone into the salon and Rita had been singing; Rita and Tim had everything, she nothing—she had felt shut out, and she had thought of their safe future.

Safe!

"If Tim dies my life will be finished," Rita said to her late on the second day of his illness. "Oh! I know there will be Barry, and I love him, but—I wonder if many mothers feel as I feel about Tim? I do not think they can. Tim has been everything ever since he came, my *real* secret life—a sort of half-divine life because it held his, had given him his. And he has understood, and in spite of being so big he has let me keep him little in both our hearts, his and mine. One has absurd and darling little intimacies with one's husband, but to have them with a son is sweeter. Tim has never outgrown his good-night kiss—our 'little' language—watching him grow up has been like watching an endless love-

liness of springtime; and it has given me the same poignant ecstasy. I suppose you think me mad—I don't care."

She stood on the shadowed veranda; beyond it the gay street fluttered and laughed, the road was full of cars and carts, hawkers strolled past with cone-shaped baskets of oranges. The sky was like a turquoise dazzle; life itself seemed to dance with the happy sunshine.

"Oh! if we were in London and the rain were falling," Rita said in a smothered voice, feeling the cruelty of careless loveliness in such an hour, the bitter contrast, longing as we all long for companionship in misery. She went back to Tim's bedside and knelt beside it. He moved his head ceaselessly, struggling ineffectually, pitifully, to escape the fever which flamed in him. She had sent for a great doctor, a throat specialist of European fame, and he came in now, accompanied by the young, clever local man, who had diagnosed diphtheria and dare not say so. The great Fevre bent over Tim, made his examination, then he lifted his face and looked at Rita, and his eyes, tired, old, so kindly, told her.

She said huskily, her head moving a little as if in uncontrollable pain:

"Then it is?"

Caro entered.

Rita said at once expressionlessly:

"It is diphtheria."

Caro went and stood beside her, and the specialist, looking from one to the other, began a hopeful little speech.

He laid bare Tim's splendid white young chest, and put his hand on it and nodded appreciatively. Tim opened golden-brown eyes and tried to smile.

"That is better—that is better," the young doctor remarked. His voice seemed too low, and his one prepared English sentence, which he had practised for days, crude and unsympathetic. Fevre went on

with his gently spoken directions, then he shook hands with Rita.

"Courage!" he murmured.

* * * * * *

In those weeks Rita, one of those women whom, because of their lack of vanity and their unself-consciousness, perhaps because they are so truly loved too, age seems to pass by, grew old. She shrank visibly; it was as if her splendid glow of health were extinguished.

Yet she went about life as usual, she dined and lunched with Caro, she was as fastidious personally as ever, she even wore her jewels, her very beautiful pearls, the white and black pearl earrings. Tim had always loved her pearls. The only difference she made was that, save for meals, she lived in Tim's room. He had two nurses, nuns, excellent women, so sweetly understanding that every smallest thing they could let Rita do they did, and whenever they could leave her safely with Tim they went out. If they had no mother's knowledge they had mother-love—they knew it in their hearts.

The weather grew hotter, the heat seemed to close in about the flat like a high wall.

Tim's face lost its swollenness, it grew white and pinched, his curls lay dark against the pillow, the light had gone from them, his eyebrows were dark, sharp bars on his forehead above his closed eyes, and his little boy's mouth was set now in the hard line of pain.

Rita knelt beside him, her hand holding his. She prayed inarticulately to some god whose name she had forgotten in her anguish:

"Let my life beat through into him. Give me this one boon and all my days I will never ask another. Give me Tim, my baby, my son; give him me—give him me——"

Fevre came again, Rita scarcely recognized his

presence. She knew he was there, she heard his voice, his steps, harsh upon the parquet floor. Sounds beat at her ears, but her senses did not accept them. Her whole being, her soul was one imploration.

The day wore on, the heat grew even more stifling. Rita still knelt, her head on Tim's thin, long hand, her own hand quick with life, holding his other.

With the later evening a little breeze rose. It waved a spray of honeysuckle in a vase beside the window, the setting sun shone through the petals, pale rose and paler gold, the cheerful sounds of the end of the working day filled the air, a band was playing softly in the distance, over everything there was a sense of relaxation.

Rita lifted her head and saw the change in Tim's face.

He could not speak, but he made a sound, and his helplessness tore at her heart, Tim fighting for breath, Tim, who had won the mile at Harrow, and took the stairs three at a time " to show that he could," and would never confess to being winded. His tired, curly head rolled over, and that dreadful, pathetic sound came from his lips again.

Rita looked up into Fevre's face.

" Do something, for God's sake, do something ! " she whispered fiercely.

He shook his head.

" Your little boy must fight alone."

His eyes met hers with a great compassion. He added strongly :

" Go on. Love him to fight; will him to . . ."

Rita said in her heart : " Fight, Tim, fight. Go on, go on . . ."

It was like the last footer match in which he had played, when he had been so desperately keen to shoot a goal, and she had " willed " him then with amazing, absurd eagerness, to make good. She saw, beyond his thin, listless face now, the face of that

other Tim, lit with ardentness, his bright head gleaming in the sharp March sunshine.

He had seen her for a second, waved, and forgotten her in the tenseness of the hour. Then, like an arrow, he had sped down the field, received the pass, shot a goal, and shot himself, head first, into a sea of mud, of boots, and other blue and white arrows which had sped after him.

And he had emerged, laughing, triumphant, indescribably happy and muddy. He had come up to Rita, smoothing out visible signs of his radiance *en route,* and had agreed it was a " bit of luck," and he was " rather bucked." And then he had gone off at a boy's effortless and swift trot to clean up and meet her again for tea. Such a tea! And the revelation, in as low a voice as possible, of what a goal shot at the precise moment, when Tim's *had* been shot, had meant. . . .

He moved on his pillows, he fought for air. And Rita thought: " There is no anguish greater than this—death itself can be no greater—to watch your child suffer and be unable to help, to take the pain away, to share it even. . . ."

Fevre looked down at her with a great pity. He longed to keep her from the last realization, and he said again:

" Love him to fight. Let your love make him fight."

Rita said aloud, without even knowing she spoke:

"Darling, stick to it. Go on, Tim, fight, *fight!*"

He opened his eyes and looked at her wonderingly, a purple flush flooded his white face, it receded. He made again the queer, dreadful, little choking sound in his poor throat, then even his breathing seemed noiseless.

Outside, in the lovely, falling twilight, a bird sang a sleepy note; the cooling breeze of night blew in softly; far away on the Seine a boat's syren hooted.

Rita and the doctor waited in the terrible shadow of a great suspense.

And as the whole sky seemed to pour roses upon the weary world Tim lifted his head; the light fell sheer upon his face, he looked at Rita and smiled, and said in the queerest, little-boy, croaking, piping voice:

"Hallo, mother, where are the head-lights?"

Fevre thought him delirious. For one moment Rita believed him so; then she, too, smiled back at him.

"I'll put them on," she said, smiling, speaking with a great effort.

Tim nodded, and even as he nodded fell fast asleep, into the deep, natural sleep of exhaustion.

"He will recover," Fevre said with gentle conviction.

Rita had risen from her knees. She could not cry even now, but she took his hand for a moment. Then, rather to his surprise, she left the room and, to his even greater surprise, returned a moment later, fastening the clasp of a string of pearls.

His glance, from which he could not quite keep curiosity, made her smile a little. She went to him and said in a whisper:

"The head-lights! Tim calls my pearls that! He says that when I don't wear them I am like a car without head-lights!"

Fevre scarcely understood now, but he nodded pleasantly.

He gave a few last orders to the day nurse, then tip-toed away.

Rita sat on, listening to Tim's soft breathing, his first untroubled breathing for three weeks.

It grew dark in a moment, it seemed, and above the street the stars came out. And then Caro came to the door as she had come a dozen times during the day; but now she came in and knelt down beside Rita, and for the first time Rita cried and spoke of

Tim, talked of him as she had always talked, and between tears Caro and she laughed over the pearl head-lights.

Caro went out and made tea and brought it in. The night nurse came on duty and thanked all the Saints she liked best for the "*pauvre petit's* blessed recovery," They made a little festa of the hour.

"To-night you will go to bed properly," Caro urged Rita.

"Madame will leave the room now and not come in again till to-morrow," the nurse said with kindly authority. Rita protested. Sœur Emilie and Caro won. Rita went back to the salon with Caro and out on to the small balcony.

She turned suddenly and caught Caro's hands.

"It is like being born again," she said. "The utter divine relief, the feeling you dare to be happy again——"

CHAPTER XII

"*Le feu qui semble éteint souvent dort sous la cendre.*"
—CORNEILLE.

THERE was no question of Egypt now, of course, at any rate for some time. Tim would not be up to the journey, even by sea, and he happened to be a bad sailor. They all drowsed and read and lazed through the apricot-coloured days, just watching other people's lives, the peace of infinite relaxation enfolding Tim and Rita.

It touched Caro too, but necessarily with less influence; but she was content to drift for a little while, how forcedly content she herself did not realize until John's telegram came.

"Ordered Cairo 17. Meet you Shepheard's Hotel. Important.—JOHN."

She was alone when the message came, and its effect, instant, almost violent, amazed her. There was no question, she must go; she longed to go. She knew now that the strain of Tim's illness, the consequent inertia of its later stage, had worn her out and that unconsciously she had been desiring some spur which would be to her mind, herself, what a tonic is to the body.

Curiously, too, she knew now that she must go alone to Egypt, the Tempests would not dream of going.

She looked up the trains to Brindisi, the connexion she must make; she would have to leave on the morrow, only a night, a half-evening to wait.

For what?

She opened her hands suddenly, as if to draw in the sunshine, the free sea——

Adventure!

Of course, and why not? Life had been "still" so long, now she wished movement.

Long, long before either Rita or she had ever heard of Hamid el Alim, they had planned to visit Egypt—now, Rita could not go, and she, in truth, whether she would or no, must.

She went down on to the veranda, Rita and Tim were half-asleep in big chairs, Caro took the third and piled the amber and white cushions behind her dark head.

"*Amici,* I leave to-morrow for Brindisi!" She held out John's wire to Rita. "I must."

"The devil and all you must!" Rita admitted frankly. "But, Caro, you need not stay there—later, as soon as Tim is fit, we can move down. Would you awfully mind coming back South, to Italy perhaps, for a month or so——?"

"It wouldn't be the return journey which would matter an atom," Caro answered, "but it is rather impossible to make definite plans ahead. D'you know, it's extraordinary, I want to go, and yet I don't—when I read the wire I felt strung up with excitement, and now——"

Rita smiled, she asked shrewdly:

"Does the question: supposing you suddenly heard you simply could *not* go, help to steady the indecision of your mind?"

Caro laughed.

"It does indeed! *Je m'en vais*——!"

"Let us hope——" Rita began, then she stopped; she had often sung Verlaine's poem, she had been about to quote it now carelessly, her love for Caro checked the words; Caro had thought of them too, she knew; both loved the song; unwillingly Rita recognized the analogy:

"Je m'en vais
Au vent mauvais
Deça delà
Pareille à la feuille morte! . . ."

Then she looked at Caro and felt relieved amusement, Caro herself was so emphatic a denial of the morbid simile; she had about her, even after these weeks of heat and tension, that air of divine freshness, well-cared-for-ness, some women keep all their lives and under any circumstance.

"She is a joy to look at," Rita thought.

"Caro Cleveland converges on Cairo consequent upon conjugal communication," Tim chanted, roused from slumber by this rare opportunity to combine three-syllable words and alliteration; he grinned at Caro and proceeded with that tact which seems to be the prerogative of nice men and boys, and is really the result of an entirely unsuspicious and not very searching mind. "D'you suppose you'll see the Sheik—how d'you pronounce the word in Egyptian, or Arabic, or Aramaic, or whatever it is, anyway—like a shriek, or like—like a bike?—— Like a shriek? Thank you. D'you suppose you'll meet his Excellency Hamid el Alim, Caro?"

Rita had been wondering this distressfully, ever since Caro's announcement, now she knew her mind, at any rate, was not unsuspicious and was on the *qui vive* to criticize any note in Caro's voice, seize on any chance word which would feed its anxiety.

Caro's voice sounded cool, but it shook a very little, almost indistinguishably, as she answered:

"I haven't an idea. He is in Cairo now, in Egypt somewhere; he left during your illness."

"Why can't John come here?" Rita demanded suddenly. "And save you this long journey?"

"He must have started now, I couldn't catch him," Caro said.

"We could look up the boats, and so on," Tim

suggested helpfully; and though she knew the very idea to be senseless, without a shadow of foundation, Caro felt in this moment as if a cabal had been formed against her, which plotted to hem her in—keep her from Egypt—and definitely, she wanted to go.

They had a last evening of song and laughter and laziness, and through it all, like an insistent undernote, there ran the thought of Egypt, of Hamid el Alim.

CHAPTER XIII

" O there were lights and laughter
And motions to and fro
Of people as they enter
And people as they go.

" And there were many voices
Vying at the feast,
But most I remember
Yours—who spoke the least."

WITTER BYNNER.

CARO, Saria and Fleet arrived at Port Said, whither Caro had elected to go on account of getting a mail-boat, after a journey which only Fleet had found bearable, and he from a merely mundane reason; the food had been good, plentiful and frequent, but even his natural enjoyment of this beneficent order of things had been tempered by his realization of the extremely contradictory outlook of his people on this point, and their inability, consequent, to his mind, on their lack of feeding, to take him long constitutionals on deck.

He was thankful to put his paws on "Afric's coral strand," but found the present-day actual grit extremely trying to his pads, and the attentions of alien mongrels infuriating. His excellent British temper, and his natural and nationally inherited desire for conquest over all foreigners, were both checked in operation by Saria's hand, which seized him and hoisted him into safe vantage, to his intense humiliation and annoyance.

Caro was oppressed by a sense of ironic disappointment, and the deadening realization one harbour is much like another, and all are either hot and dirty, or cold and dirty.

It was true, Africans of every tint were everywhere visible, and that the cries and calls and orders were in "different" guttural voices, but the hot, discontented, over-excited crowd was the same as she had seen at Marseilles, at Liverpool, at Brindisi, years before at Hamburg, Esjberg, and Havre.

She had expected in Africa the Egypt of a thousand dreams; she found, on a Thursday afternoon, a place shimmering in dusty heat haze, peopled by a throng which looked cheap and sordid, and was dressed apparently in cast-off European clothes, their sole evidence, beyond their skins, of Eastern blood being either the tarboosh or a dingy turban wound about the head.

Before her flat-roofed houses stretched, and one shop, owned apparently by a German, the famous "Simon Arzt" shop where you could buy anything, and whose owner had made a fortune because travellers seem to have a passion for spending money on things they do not want rather than not spend at all.

Caro felt she loathed Africa despite its picture postcard sunsets which flamed across the sea and sky, despite its day-time difference from all other places she had seen; and she thought wearily and angrily: "If one told people who had never been here of the place they simply wouldn't believe you—either the dullness and unromanticness, or the sunset, which is so vivid it is crude and yet divine all the time as well!"

Saria, pale, but composed and reliant, came back bearing Fleet, and followed by a ship's servant who had been mesmerized by her apparently into making foreign workers work.

"I've got a carriage, ma'am," Saria said, "and tea, and all our things put out nicely if you'll come."

"Saria, you are an angel and a marvel," Caro murmured, and her credence in Saria's celestial qualities deepened as, whilst the train loaded the boat's luggage, Saria prepared and served tea on a tray pro-

duced apparently from nowhere, and boasting one of Caro's own spotless cloths.

"So this, ma'am, is Africa?" Saria remarked; she surveyed it dispassionately from the footboard; an Arab, passing, looked straight into her face with a sort of perfectly gentle impertinence, grinned, and nodded. Saria, with heightened colour, met his glance aloofly, then turned and made the startling observation:

"The Prince, ma'am, bore very little resemblance to such as these. Yet African just the same, of course, though he hid it well."

Everything at that moment connected with Egypt was under a cloud in Caro's opinion; she was too tired, and bored, and hot to feel interested or pleased with anything, but somehow this casual criticism, made quite impersonally, lit a flame of contra-partisanship in her. She made no reply, but within herself she debated.

She was thankful when the train shrieked and clanked on its way over dull plains where men toiled, and which were as featureless, as inexpressive as Salisbury Plain itself—and nearly as English! Then dusk fell and the lamp smelt, and then it was Cairo and a glitter of light and a throng of voices, people, noise, the sense of very swift life which grew more vivid still as soon as Shepheard's was reached, the big terrace of which was like an epitome of Paris and London night gaiety, cooled by huge waving palms, poised above the thousand-coloured street life.

As Caro mounted the wide steps an Arab in a spotless white robe bowed before her, another awaited her in the hotel entrance, both spoke intelligible English in soft, slow voices. She was given a spacious room with a view far over the city, to its distant edge where the minarets cut the skyline, and from which there rose up the sound of a million sounds, the savour of countless perfumes, essences, smells,

and a throbbing of a restless interest which intrigued her, although as yet she was apart from it.

She bathed, dressed, and went downstairs to dine, and bade the waiter give her a table where she could see the blazing stars. She could not have said why she thought so of them, but she did, and she had the strangest feeling, too, as if the stars were in her blood, as if she had kinship with this pulsating, coloured, lovely, languid night.

She dined very quickly, and then explained to the French *maître d'hôtel* that she would like a reputable guide to accompany her on a short walk.

"*Parfaitement, Madame,*" the man agreed, "we have such guides in the employ of the hotel, *naturellement*. If Madame will wait but a little moment. . . ."

He came back, followed by a tall youth who had a serious face and was clad in a flowing saffron-coloured robe; about his tarboosh was wound a piece of jade-green silk. He bowed to Caro and said, smiling and showing beautiful teeth:

"I speak the English, yes. Where will my lady go?"

"Just a little walk," Caro explained. "Anywhere, really," she added vaguely.

"I understand. I know. If my lady will come."

He led the way down the wide steps, with their tubs of flaming flowers on every second step, into the narrow, crowded street, and almost at once it seemed to Caro they plunged into shadow.

For the sake really of speaking, Caro said to the dragoman:

"What is your name?"

"Sadu, my lady."

He smiled again and nodded to her, and pointing to a house on the right, which seemed to Caro a white square with one dark, narrow opening, he added:

"Typical house."

From within there came music, faint, wailing, yet appealing, and unrestful too.

Sadu passed into a narrow alley-way, above which, in one place, two houses met, cutting out the stars and sky; a purple-covered lamp gleamed at the far end.

Beneath it, with a thrill and a genuine and violent start, Caro met Hamid el Alim.

He had been about to enter one of the nearest entrances when Caro's "*You,*" an exclamation made before she knew that she had spoken, arrested him.

Almost stupidly he echoed the word "You," and then their hands met and that extraordinary "effect" of restlessness which Caro had experienced ever since she had come to Cairo seemed to become this concentration of shakenness she felt now, as Hamid held her hand.

Clutching at the very ordinary, the most conventional thought, she said a little breathlessly:

"How amazing, Excellency, meeting you like this! I only arrived this evening. I am here to meet my husband."

Hamid said in a banal way, "Indeed?" Then, as he released her hand, he added in a sharper voice:

"He is coming, Mr. Cleveland, on the Commission?"

"The Commission?" Caro repeated vaguely.

"But yes, the Imperial Peace Commission which is being sent out to settle Egyptian affairs in an English way. We have Lord Wegorne, Lord Marson, Sir Henry Bulke, and Mr. Jacobs, lent from India! I think Mr. Cleveland comes as Lord Marson's secretary, or perhaps I am wrong."

"I haven't the least idea," Caro explained. "I am afraid I am so ignorant that I have not even heard or read about the Commission! Are you interested in it, Excellency?"

Quite lightly, yet with a note of sardonic amusement, Hamid answered:

"Oh, well, you see, my interests are rather bound up in my country. Is it not so?"

"I suppose so—of course they must be, I mean,"

Caro murmured. "Really, I am ashamed to be so out of things, but at Paris, since you were there, we have had rather a tragic time. Tim, the Tempests' son, you remember, nearly died of diphtheria. I am afraid kingdoms might have fallen during those dreadful weeks and we should not have known."

"I am sorry," Hamid said gravely. "Glad, however, the boy is better. He is here with his people and you?"

"I am alone," Caro said.

"Alone!" Hamid echoed.

"Until—until my husband arrives."

"On the 17th."

"You know that—the date—how?"

Hamid broke into her speech with a laugh.

"Madame, I know when the big boats arrive; I have no magician's clairvoyance, I assure you!"

He added swiftly:

"My car is at the end of this street; will you not let me drive you out towards the desert? It is a divine night."

He had slid a cool hand beneath her elbow to guide her, and now he piloted her towards the right, down a tortuous winding way out into a main street.

A native in dark livery waited beside the car. Hamid spoke to him and gave an order to the dragoman.

"He will wait here for you," he explained briefly to Caro, intent on wrapping a big fur rug round her. "Now you will be warm."

He vaulted in with extraordinary lightness of movement for so big a man, and the car slid forward almost noiselessly.

Caro said:

"In Paris you promised me great pace, Excellency. Have you forgotten?"

As if the words, spoken without any *arrière pensée*, had been the point of a spear-head which had cleaved through the conventional mood, the mood of business

absorption which had encompassed Hamid, he turned now and became in one instant another being, the man who had knelt in the forest, the man who had asked softly, insistently, "Shall you be glad?"

The transition was so marked, so potent, that Caro knew it instantly; it was as if, to a swimmer in a cold current, a warm one had swept in, lulling, delightful, and as well, in this actuality, a stimulant to self-consciousness.

Caro became suddenly extraordinarily aware of Hamid. For the first time she saw he was wearing the tarboosh; it gave him a certain new attractiveness, the attraction of the unknown, which is so dangerous.

The desert wind swept past the car, cold, exhilarating, scented, giving that feeling of quickened life which makes casual travellers in the East able to bear, for a short time, any fatigue; to enjoy, for a short time, intensely.

All the way in the train from Port Said, Caro had seen the desert, but it had been a peopled desert; here no soul moved, nor was any habitation visible.

"We must leave the car," Hamid said; he vaulted the side again, and came round and lifted her out, saying, deliberately:

"Let me see your shoes?"

Caro lifted one narrow foot in its black satin slipper with a ridiculously high emerald-green heel, for inspection.

Hamid put his hand beneath it and laughed:

"Is that a green heel? It is! The colour excuses all its other faults, and even the desert will be kind to it, for it will know why you are so decorative!"

He rose and offered his arm.

"Will you please let me guide you? Even your —very beautiful-green eyes cannot know the way as I do."

They walked upon the soundless sand, the desert wind rushing out, sweeping over them as if to greet them, draw them in towards itself.

"Listen," Hamid said, halting abruptly, "listen to the noises of the world being buried in the desert's depths! You can *feel* its stillness stifling them, hushing them under; the wind brings them and presses them down upon the desert, and it receives them. Here is the space which is power, which never yields its secrets—it is the fringe of Egypt's robe."

He spoke in a low voice, very slowly, and insensibly, the monotony of tone and vision influenced Caro's mind mesmerically. She seemed to see the sky as the endless drifting veil of Egypt's night-dark hair, jewelled with the worship offerings of centuries, the flowing, boundless mist of sand as the garment Egypt wound about the mystery of her form; the sky, the desert, the sweeping, intoxicating wind, each potent beyond conception, became the inexorable, vast lures this courtesan of time itself, this empress of imagery, spread for her adorers.

This hour, her presence in it, Hamid, were all unreal, a dream she knew to be a dream.

A bat brushed her face, and she started violently; her hand closed down on Hamid's arm convulsively. He put his own free hand upon it, warm, dry, amazingly calming. He looked down into her upturned face, sharply white in the blazing moonlight.

"You must not be frightened," he said very gently.

Caro gave a nervous little laugh.

"I think I am over-tired; that makes me stupid. And it must be very late, Excellency; we ought to be asleep."

Instantly Hamid said:

"We will go at once, of course, if you wish it."

His words, the way he spoke, made Caro feel she had been *gauche,* inartistic, that she had wounded his feelings in some way, and yet at the same time she knew it was absurd she should feel so.

The idea flashed into her mind that Hamid's hauteur, his ridiculous hyper-sensitiveness, was that

of a schoolboy who has been laughed at: he was amazingly young in some respects!

She said to him, her voice a little laughter-shaken:

"I do like your desert really!"

He was silent a minute, then he, too, laughed, and then disturbingly, growing very far away indeed from Caro's "schoolboy" picture of him, he added in a queer voice:

"If I seem, how shall I say, burdensome?—I mean I feel, you made me feel, I had weighted you down with my own interest—it was because we are here together for the first time, you and I, and I have dreamt of this so often; and in my own mind it has outweighed every other possible interest—pleasure."

"Of course, I did not think you—your—your natural love for the desert—your kindness in showing it to me—like this—burdensome—how could I? I should indeed be ungrateful."

She felt her words lame, banal; they seemed cheap somehow, said in this vast, cool space, her implied criticism so little: "natural love for the desert——!" Her mind rebelled at her poor choice of words. She forced her mood and said almost violently:

"It is divine, amazing; it does stir me."

Hamid answered as strongly:

"Ah! you shall see—one night we will come—and you shall adventure into the desert—as we who belong to it know it, not as a guide knows it, to make so much out of it per mile——" He stopped, bent towards her, and said almost in a whisper: "Are you now glad you have come?"

Caro felt a sudden tense embarrassment. She said abruptly, very clearly:

"It is very late; I am so tired. I think we must go home."

"As you will," Hamid answered. He took her back to the car in silence, and in silence drove her

home. On the hotel steps he spoke for the first time:

"Adieu, Madame!"

"Good night," Caro answered; she hesitated, waited a moment, even, but Hamid, after his conventional bow and farewell, did not turn his head again, and the car slipped into the dark.

Caro's mind registered the thought that Egyptians were extremely thin-skinned, or else that Hamid el Alim was extremely spoilt.

Then, in her room, she found mauve orchids. Saria had gone to bed. Caro stood beside the tall vase: Hamid had been perfectly aware she had been coming, had arrived, indeed, and yet had never spoken of his knowledge to her.

But the frail and gorgeous loveliness of the orchids swept away the memory of rather stupid embarrassment, the conclusion that Hamid was petulant, small in his friendship. She retained the thought he was a romantic; it blended with the memory of the starlit desert, the flaming moonlight, Hamid's passionate admiration and expression of it. Caro leant from the window; faint, desolate sounds, the mysterious cries of nights which distress the imagination came to her. She was in Egypt, in Cairo; about her was the desert, that tomb of love and lust, glory and power, that despair of the seeker. It all caressed Caro's mind with a touch at once vivid and arresting; she had come rather strung up with expectation, reality was of less febrile insistence, a stronger thing.

She felt she would welcome adventure, a self-admission which meant she would go in search of it.

With the morning John's telegram announced his arrival at Alexandria. He would be in Cairo for lunch.

He came just behind a march of malcontents, a sight which had disgusted Caro because of its depress-

ing usualness. To meet it here in the land of mystic romance was the cruellest blow to multi-coloured imagery possible! The strikers were rail employees, tramway men; they marched as the out-of-work do march, diversely clad, in good order, banners waving above their heads, uniformed men policing them at irregular intervals.

They had one difference from Western strikers. These men talked, gesticulated, as they marched, cried out to comrades; they were interested, avid of criticism, hostile in gaze and speech, if powerless.

John drove up behind them, his English, arrogant eyes roving with contempt over the blue, and green, and purple, and pink turbaned heads, the dark faces.

He got out of the car a little stiffly, and ran up the steps to Caro; his greeting was off-hand, nervous.

"Hallo, my dear, how goes it?"

He stood before her bareheaded, the same John, save for some, in this moment, indefinable differences which Caro's mind knew were there, but which it could not classify.

"Let's lunch in your sitting-room, if you don't mind?" John suggested. "I'll just bath—and be along. I'm staying with my Chief——" He looked at Caro with a certain pride. "You didn't know I'd taken to slogging at things? Uncle Richard was keen on it, and I did swot up a bit for the Diplomatic once, y'know. So I got this job with Lord Wegorne —messenger business, y'know, that sort of thing."

"I am glad," Caro said shyly, "if you like it."

"Oh, I do," John assured her. "It helped to fill up things at first, and then I grew rather keen, y'know. One does, after a bit. I ought to have had a job long ago." He nodded at her sapiently, his old charming smile lit his face. "H'ever, better late than never, what?"

He went off to the Embassy, a straight, tall being. Somehow the sight of his blue-serge back, the glint of brown leather shoes, made Caro's heart ache.

She ran up to the sitting-room, tears stinging behind her eyes. Saria laid the table; she took a few orchids and placed them in a crystal bowl of Caro's. Fleet was oddly excited; it was as if he knew John was coming, his English master, who understood little dogs.

John noticed him the very first thing. He could hardly fail to do so, because Fleet's ecstasy was so loud and animated. He laughed, bent and picked him up, and said:

"Hallo, old feller." Then he said to Saria: "Hallo, Saria, the little chap hasn't forgotten me, what?"

"No, sir," Saria answered. She added: "You're looking well, sir."

John nodded. Fleet's head was pressed under his chin. "Fleet's in top-hole condition; you've kept him absolutely rippingly. Does he like foreign countries?"

"He despises 'em, sir," Saria said dryly. "First thing he hunts for fighters, and doesn't find any; then he misses the rain, I think, and the hunting. If he digs the earth here, it crumbles under his paws; it did in Paris, too. He likes doing things that are a trouble, and then resting; here he hasn't a chance!"

"I'd like to see him doing his rocking-horse step on the desert!" John laughed. "I bet he'd curse the sand!"

He talked of Fleet, his work, through lunch, at which Saria waited; then, when Caro and he were alone, he began to walk up and down. He stopped beside Caro to hold a match for her cigarette, and she saw his hand was shaking a little.

He squared up against the window, hands deep thrust into the pockets of his thin blue coat. He looked extraordinarily young somehow, and clean, and rather wistful, Caro thought.

She herself felt dreadfully shy, and was angry

with herself for feeling so, and it added to her embarrassment.

John broke the silence suddenly:

"I say, Car, y'know Uncle Richard has only a few months to live, perhaps less? It's a certain thing. He knows, of course, and I—we had a long talk with Sir James Pyke and that Austrian-American chap Behrens—Borden—what's his name? So I felt—I thought—I mean it seems as if we, you and I, ought to come to some sort of understanding. Car——"

"Yes?"

Her eyes met his. They both flushed a little.

"Car, look here. Do you—have you ever—d'you suppose—— Oh! damn it all, have you ever thought you would care to—to—make it up——?"

Their eyes met again, and in that one glance Caro knew the truth. John was being extraordinarily decent, for there was someone else; she had seen that light herself in his eyes years before, and now it explained John's new bearing, perhaps his work.

She did not know what she felt, but she did know she could have broken down and cried despairingly, given way utterly: it was all so hopeless, so useless, it all *hurt* so. John someone else's, John working for someone else—and it was so long since they had met—oh! what had they made of life. . . .?

She said very gently and very definitely:

"No."

John heaved a sigh, and then he said quite frankly:

"I had to ask, but I am glad for both our sakes it's 'no,'" he added very quickly. "Of course, I knew it would be, but I—you see, after you'd gone I simply went off the deep end utterly—I'd been rotten, and I grew rottener; I didn't care. It was so beastly lonely, and I felt ashamed. I hated you for making me, and myself for having given you the chance, to make me suffer. . . . I dunno, Car, our

marriage seemed to start off pretty well—I"—he stopped, then went on, looking away from her. "As long as I live I shall never care again as I cared then—that first year. That was marriage—that clear sort of happiness, and the tenderness. If we'd had a real interest, a hard one, work, I mean, even a place to see to, if we hadn't let so many people into our lives—— We ragged things out between us, and took the reaction in different ways. I plunged, you drew further and further back. . . . It wasn't to say all this I came, though. I——" His eyes, nervous, yet very clear, met hers fully.

Caro smiled at him suddenly.

"John," she said, "who is she, dear old boy?"

"Of course, I knew you knew," he mumbled. Then he spoke up: "It's my cousin, Victoria Chandos."

The slow colour dyed even Caro's white throat rose-pink; again that confusion of emotion swept over her. The little Chandos girl—she could only be eighteen now, just nineteen, perhaps. She was a dear. How glad John's people would be, and it was so eminently suitable. And so *that* was how they all looked on this tragedy of her own marriage! —a thing to be dealt with with as much dignity as possible, and then entirely dismissed . . . that must be, of course, and then John would make this very right and good marriage . . . his wrong-doing counted not at all. . . .

John's voice broke in:

"I don't, of course, know quite how you feel about it, Caro, but—we—the lawyers—I dunno; if you'd wish to begin proceedings for divorce at once? —It seems the best thing to do really, don't you think? It can be done awfully quietly—you can leave it all to me. I will instruct your lawyers—I'll agree to anything they say——"

He moved restlessly, then suddenly, impetuously, crossed to her.

"All the money part," he said in a muffled voice, "of course you'll have—when Uncle Richard dies I shall be wealthy—you—the lawyers will arrange all that fairly for you——"

Caro gave a little stifled laugh.

"I know that matters least of all, but I had to tell you, put it into words," John rushed on.

"You are very generous to me," Caro said.

"It's only right," John muttered, close to her. He moved again, very restlessly.

How he longed to get away—out of this big room where he felt so deucedly uncomfortable . . . though the worst was over; he had said all the things now.

From the street there came the thud of running feet, the sound of shouts, a rifle shot.

John thrust his head and shoulders out of the window. A crowd was running in the direction away from the hotel; behind it a dark figure lay, very still, on the sun-hot roadway.

"I say, they've—a man has been shot," John said almost stupidly. "The strikers, of course—it's a policeman. Do not come to the window."

He went back to her, his face serious.

"And last week there was a pretty bad riot just outside," he said to Caro. "You won't stay long here, of course? I imagined you would be travelling with the Tempests. I believe I return, to Paris anyway, this week, or next at the latest."

"We could scarcely travel together," Caro said. She could not quite keep the bitterness out of her voice.

And John's reply was so matter of fact, so ready.

"No, I suppose it wouldn't do."

He studied her under his eyelids, his fair head bent; in his heart, too, the strangest, saddest feelings stirred. He had the strangest longing even now, when he was quite sure about Victoria, and when all the way was cleared, to go up to her and

put an arm round her, and say, as he had said a hundred times in the old days:

"Darling, come on, buck up; I hate to see you down!"

It seemed incongruous and silly that now he had not the right to do such a thing. The great tameness of this last settlement became a horrible thing suddenly, a biting mockery of their marriage, an insult to it.

His colour changed. He realized suddenly that Caro and he were meeting for the last time perhaps—and it was all so empty—and yet it was heart-rending.

"I'd better go," he said huskily.

He did not try to take Caro's hand. He felt if he touched her he would break down. He made blindly for the door, opened it, and went out.

* * * * *

"It's a little death—it's like a little death, a bit of you dying," Caro told herself.

She saw John's future, the future of this new John who liked work, who recognized life had need of it; this new John who was in love with a little girl, clear eyed, clear souled, transparent, and—suitable!

She knew his own people would look upon his marriage to herself as John's "wild oats." His divorce was distressing, most regrettable, but this new marriage would make everything fair and good again!

John had gone out of her life for ever—John the playmate, lover, husband. . . . In a little while she would be entirely free . . . her heart, her life was free now in reality.

CHAPTER XIV

"There is nothing more inventive than suffering."
—NAZIANZEN.

THE house of Hassenein el Alim was in a very narrow way, and its entrance gates blocked one end of the street. It commanded therefore an extensive view from its heavily shuttered windows. High walls enclosed the house, and within the first gate, which was always locked, there was a lodge.

Hamid had his own keys, and came and went as he chose, naturally, yet no entrance nor exit of his passed without a dozen unseen eyes seeing it.

It was late afternoon when he drove up now in a little native carriage. He went through the first and second gates swiftly. The white sunlight of the open courtyard struck sharply on his scarlet tarboosh as he paused for a moment before vanishing into the cool gloom of the entrance.

In his own apartments his servant awaited him. The man clothed him with deft swiftness in native dress—a white robe, a three-fold waist-cloth of heavy silver cloth embroidered in vivid scarlet, and wound a white and jade turban about his head. From within the thin folds which fell either side his face and framed his strong, tanned throat Hamid's eyes looked out impassively with that serene fatalism which is a heritage of his race.

The change of dress had changed the man. It was impossible now to think of Hamid as a Balliol student, to see him in London, Paris. It was possible only to vision him in the desert, in a barbaric setting, regnant, cruel, avid of power.

Paradoxically, now that he wore the heelless native footwear, he seemed even taller. Paradoxically again, the soft outline of the robe, the muslin folds of the turban made his features harsher, gave to him an appearance of ruthless strength. He walked, too, superbly now, like some lithe animal, with the same freedom and noiselessness.

His father's rooms were dim, and the scent of musk was almost overpowering. There was a rustle, the sound of soft whispering as Hamid waited without for a moment, but when he entered he found his father alone, supported by many cushions, smoking hashish.

He lifted his head and his eyes looked fixedly at his only son—the child of his old age, the pride of his life and soul.

Hamid knelt before him, and, lifting his hand, pressed it against his own forehead, murmuring reverently the words of filial greeting, the prayer which accompanied them.

Hassenein el Alim blessed him and bade him be seated.

Hamid's own servant, as he clapped his hands, ran in with his pipe; then he went out, his face to his master.

For a time the two men smoked in silence. Somewhere in a room near a native instrument was being played, delicately, enchantingly. Hamid's eyes half closed, his thoughts fled down a trail which lay near the open sunlight, far, far from this darkened room, from all the purpose of this house, his own visit.

Hassenein el Alim's voice said, with the fine-edged clarity of age which gives a certain definite dignity to speech, a certain hauteur:

"My son, is it well with the cause?"

In answer Hamid drew a paper from the folds of his waist-cloth and handed it to his father.

"Read it, read it for me, my son."

Hamid read it aloud, leaning forward so that no

word might be lost. Then he tore the paper into minute fragments.

Hassenein el Alim said with the swiftness of irritation :

"One death is valueless. The hunt is not for small game."

Hamid laughed. He was really amused. His splendid teeth gleamed in his dark face.

"True, my father. But it was not the fault of the revolutionaries that the populace fled! It was beyond expectation they should assemble in the bazaar and clamour to be killed!"

"There is always much talk," Hassenein said, "and little action."

Hamid's amusement fell from him.

"There was little talk and much action at the outlying stations and water junctions last night. The news will come in within the week. Then there will be an outcry, an example made; the example is the signal for the great uprising. During the next month we must either strike, fight, or give in, be conquered. Half our army is below Girgeh. It is well staffed and well equipped. It will march on Suez whilst the rioters take Cairo : a double coup will give us success. I shall fight in Cairo. I can lead best there. I know the ways of the English."

He laughed with the enjoyment of the thought, but Hassenein el Alim did not laugh. His magnificent old eyes stared like a hawk's, dagger-keen, before him. He said slowly at last :

"And the French, of them what does Raboun say?"

"He arrives in Cairo on the twenty-second. He is sure of them. He brings with him certain papers. He has various debts to collect, I think. Duval, who has the managership at Kufar, is in his pay."

Hassenein nodded.

"We should be careful during these next weeks."

Hamid blew a cloud of smoke from his immensely

long-stemmed pipe. His nostrils expanded contemptuously.

"In what way? The English are my friends. The French no longer count. We are sure of our own——"

Hassenein turned slowly on his cushions. "No one may be sure of these people until they are dead. There are rumours in from the desert that this man Essex" (he pronounced it with a slurring of sound which would have made the word unintelligible to any European) "has subdued the Bedouins, and is said to have great influence amongst the Sudanese." His eyes rested on his son with a sort of tranquil fierceness.

"Robert Essex, the Englishman who looks like an Arab," Hamid agreed carelessly. "He is a poseur. He counts little in a big scheme." He had heard much of Robert Essex, each time with annoyance. Now, in obedience to his type of nature, he belittled what he wished to disbelieve.

"Details make the success of every great scheme," Hassenein observed sententiously.

A sound coming from far away, yet growing clearer, broke the short silence with power: it was the fellah's voice crying the hour of sunset.

Instantly Hamid rose. He held out his hand to his father to help him. Together they walked to the small room which had its window towards Mecca; together they knelt upon their praying rugs, the clear, beautiful voice of Hassenein el Alim blending with Hamid's deeper, more careless tones.

With that spirit of deliberate outlawry which fanaticism alone gives, they prayed to God in unison, asking for His peace whilst they prepared to destroy it in the belief they did His Will.

There was no haste in Hamid's devotions; nevertheless, the moment he was free, and had said farewell to his father, he hurried back to his room. His servant was not there, neither did he send for him.

He changed into European dinner kit. When he put on the tarboosh he looked the product of any big city. Round the corner of the street, out of view of the house, his car was waiting, the chauffeur standing ready to open the door.

Hamid told him to drive to Shepheard's. All day he had been thinking of this hour, longing for it.

The sky was still like a flaming flower, the street was gay with its easy evening life, its light amusement, its promise of excitement, the herald of the wonderful Eastern night which is at once a narcotic and a stimulant. The flood of colours, of languages, of sound, was like wine to Hamid's mind. It stirred it, and spun his thoughts round in a gleaming whirl.

He saw instantly that Caro was not on the veranda, but as he walked up the steps she appeared, followed by her maid, who was going to walk, and who left her almost at once. As she went a man joined Caro. He had driven up before Hamid to the hotel. Hamid hesitated a second, then went forward. A dozen people nodded to him, greeted him in French and English. He made a deliberate way to Caro, his eyes on the man he divined to be her husband.

Caro introduced them formally, and John said pleasantly:

"H' are you?" and nodded.

He had quite definitely the young Englishman's lack of desire to know "natives," princes or otherwise. He was, of course, perfectly courteous, but he was also perfectly colourless. It would have seemed to him impossible that Hamid el Âlim and he should have any interest in common.

And, as they stood together chatting on trivialities, close below the Marchese Sforza passed, and Caro called his name instinctively. He stopped, saw her, and stood there for an instant, his head uncovered,

his eyes fixed steadfastly upon her face. Hamid el Alim was hidden from him by the throng. Sforza ran eagerly up the steps and bowed over Caro's hand, and, as their hands touched, for one lightning instant he looked at her with that look which seemed to slip deep into her mind, seeking its secrets.

Then, as he raised his head, he saw Hamid el Alim Neither man spoke, and Caro, aware of some tension, unaware of its cause, murmured John's name to Sforza.

The two men shook hands. John was cordial, his usual very pleasant self. Sforza and he talked together whilst Hamid talked with Caro. Then, after a few minutes, Sforza made Caro his adieux. He suggested John and she should dine with him the following night, and it was John who answered rather hesitatingly :

"I may be gone, Marchese, I fear."

Sforza expressed suitable regrets, and moved away. As he walked slowly along the terrace a very pretty Frenchwoman caught his arm.

"Marchese, Marchese, I cannot allow this cruelty ! This is the second time you cut me ! Now come and give me an ice, some coffee, and a cigarette ! My poor Gaston is having to work late for his ungrateful country ; stay and be a solace to me."

"Madame, to be your solace will be my joy and distinction ! " Sforza laughed. He liked little Madame d'Artois genuinely, she was pretty, witty, and indiscreet, and in love with her husband.

Now she poured out a stream of remarks, mingled with a stream of questions.

"Things are rather serious, *mon cher,* do you not think ? Though Gaston says I am a stupid child to be nervous ! and that I am not really nervous, but want to return to Paris ! Who would not ? When were you last there ? Did you see the ballet d'Egyptienne then ? Ah, but divine, *mon ami!* If Egypt to-day were like that, *mon Dieu,* one could

never leave it! Tell me, I saw you speaking to the lovely Mrs. Cleveland; do you know her well? They say, my maid says, Prince el Alim is quite *toqué* about her! It was the talk of Paris in the springtime! Now they meet here, how romantic! They have courage, these English women. I would not dare to trust an Oriental, but perhaps she means to marry him. I suppose one could? I mean, I suppose it would be possible for a white woman to marry a Moslem? Or does his law, or faith, or something queer forbid it? He is divinely handsome, do you not think? And they say his career. . . . ! Only one never knows! At least, one's husband never tells one! Speaking of husbands, Monsieur Cleveland looks quite *bon enfant,* I think. Gaston says he is 'thick' though; he knew him in Paris. She is divorcing him, of course. So sad. But, *qui sait,* perhaps better so? To be married to a man in love with another woman—— *Oh! là là, quel sort tragique!* I should go mad at once!"

"I did not know Mrs. Cleveland intended to divorce her husband," Sforza said, speaking with curious difficulty. His throat seemed to be tightening, he was extraordinarily stirred; he had never thought of Caro as being free, he had not dared to think so of her, to let himself think so; he took out his case and began to fit a cigarette into a short tortoise-shell holder; he could not trust himself to look at Madame d'Artois lest his eyes should betray his desperate interest.

Madame d'Artois gave a little tinkling laugh.

"Oh, they arrange the last rites together now, I suppose! *Monsieur le mari* is *très convenable,* I assure you. He is staying at the Embassy, *Madame, sa femme,* here! But I thought all the world knew? It was very open, almost shameless! He had a raging *affaire* with an English woman. I forget her name, but she had blond *cendré* hair one year and Titian the next, and such

jewels——! You must have seen her in Paris? It is all *vieux jeu* now, but Cleveland was mad about her, and his wife, after bearing it all very proudly and serenely, as I could not do, would never do, simply left him, and travelled with the Tempest woman, an American, a *belle-laide* with an enormously good-looking and stupid husband. But now Madame Cleveland is alone, I think—save for the consolation of the *beau* Hamid!"

Sforza smiled mechanically in answer to the ripple of laughter. An illogical, bitter anger flared up in him against this pretty, damnably silly little fool, then died, and in its place a sharp anguish filled his heart as he thought of how unhappy Caro must have been bearing her husband's flagrant unfaithfulness "proudly and serenely."

She had suffered that, and he had never known!

He ventured to turn so in his chair that he might glance at her, though every line of her face, each least significance of colouring, expression, was before him always; he wore the memory of her like a miniature within his heart.

His glance swerved as a passer-by, halting, shut Caro from his vision, and rested on John.

Yes, he was "thick," as d'Artois had suggested, thick as a result of that capacious self-contentment, acceptance of a state of *bien-être,* which seemed bred in men of his type, and made them stupid with complacency about things they had neither contrived nor could ever have influenced at all.

But, at least, John Cleveland and he had, Sforza recognized, a certain mutual level in their attitude towards Hamid el Alim! That would always be a bond between them, Sforza decided with grim humour.

He let himself remember his last meeting with Hamid el Alim months before. He had the cool certainty Cleveland would have abetted him in that adventure; thick, self-indulgent, heedless, yes—but

with a code rigid as cast-iron on all matters of fair play, in all men's affairs, a strong hitter there, however careless in other things.

And quite surely, Sforza divined the Western outlook in John, its chill arrogance and limitation, its changelessness—the outlook he shared himself.

He turned with a start in answer to Madame d'Artois' plaintive cry: "Return, dear wanderer!"

He "returned" submissively to her chatter, her tinted prettiness, and responded with that practised courtesy, which long suffering of fools makes so necessary in social life, his real mind held, overwhelmed, by this new aspect of Caro's life. Perhaps, in that hour, he realized, as he had never done before, the depth of the passion he felt, for the knowledge Caro would be free outweighed, beyond contemplation almost, the fact her freedom must come through divorce, a fact, which to a man of Sforza's birth, outlook, upbringing, must, in any other case, have been of paramount importance. Divorce, for men such as he, had been, until now, a thing impossible; his religion, his pride forbade, would have forbidden the idea; now, loving Caro as he did, he welcomed its advent.

He sat gazing down at the tessellated pavement, apparently listening, his dark face bent, the short dark lashes throwing into relief the clear tan of his skin, each feature of his face extremely distinct, austerely carved in the hard, revealing light. Suddenly, feeling a gaze on him, he looked up and met Hamid el Alim's brilliant eyes.

Sforza's eyes glittered for one second, then the mask of indifference he seemed able to assume at will obliterated all expression; he returned stare for stare, tranquilly, coolly, at last forcing down the other man's eyes, in which he had seen pass for his benefit, expressions of triumph, admiration, sensuality, and hatred, before Hamid turned away.

Caro and he walked away from John.

D'Artois came up behind Sforza; he was a thin, exquisitely dressed man, whose flippancy concealed his real cleverness.

He took his wife to the car, for which she had sent, and went back to Sforza for a cocktail.

He nodded in the direction in which Hamid had vanished.

"I have been talking with Lord Wegorne about that young man." He leant forward. "You have no immediate news, Marchese, of your brother?"

"I am to meet him to-night," Sforza said quietly.

The Frenchman's eyes opened, his hands made a little gesture of amazement. Sforza added with a faint smile:

"Here, in Cairo!"

D'Artois burst out laughing. He looked round cautiously:

"He is an extraordinary being, and we are all in competition to pick his brains! Your brother countrymen are avid, I assure you! He is like, Monsieur Essex, the man in the Kipling tale who became a sais to catch a sais, was it not? Only your brother's chosen task is far more difficult. But he becomes everything to learn anything!"

Sforza nodded; he knew d'Artois was, like every other thinking man, seriously disturbed by the question of the hour; since the war there had been ferment, smothered insurrection; now, lately, the discontent had been openly expressed, evidenced, and from Cairo to Khartoum, unrest was at work; twice a big caravan had been attacked, rifled, men killed.

The Government was already handicapped by ignorance of the size of the marauding parties, the constituents of those bands of trained robbers, by the secrecy with which the members were rallied, dispersed; indeed, the detail work of the rebel organizations, both in the desert and in Cairo, was so excellent, it was obvious the instigators must have large funds

at their disposal, and—a more dangerous matter—an intimate knowledge of the workings of the Government's mind, for a very subtle skill was displayed in discounting all pacific efforts engineered by the Secret Service Department.

It was a game of chess in which "check" was invariably checkmated.

It had been possible to hush up desert fights, incidental British murders, but hard on the heels of this act of politic patience there followed invariably an outbreak in Cairo, and later, the strikers' riots, fomented by Turkish agitators, paid for by Raboun, subsidized by Hamid el Alim.

Into this smouldering fire a Gandhi message of uprising fell like alcohol, and accounts of desert battles, of renewed and terrible attacks on isolated British officials, poured into Cairo; the general feeling of disruption, of suspicion, was augmented by the failure of two big European firms, which threw thousands of men out of work, just as the drought became serious in the country, a fact at once seized upon by the revolutionaries as evidence of the negligence and meanness of the authorities in connexion with the irrigation scheme.

"Young Egypt" shrieked its defiance and hatred of alien rule to the skies in its vitriolic journals, which (a mistake to be paid for out of all proportion to its value) were ignored by the authorities.

All over Egypt there was that irritated restlessness which is so often a forerunner of illness in a human being, and equally, is outward evidence of secret disease in a community.

In Constantinople there were endless strikes, India was in ferment, none the less bitter or far-reaching in its influence because it was partially held under by an iron rule; it seemed to Hassenein el Alim his hour had come.

Raboun Bey's advent, some weeks earlier, had supplied Hassenein with certain assurances he re-

quired; these in his keeping, he listened with tolerance to Raboun's suggestion for a great Cairene rising.

"We ourselves, Prince, I imagine, will remove to the villa!" Raboun murmured, his dark eyes, apparently rather bored, noting every fleeting expression on his employer's face; its present open contempt caused him to add smoothly:

"Perhaps, however, if my daughter Fari accompanied the harîm? We do not wish to have the women in the city if there is any danger."

"Ah, you think so generously for others, Raboun Bey," Hassenein el Alim answered, "for myself . . ." he lifted his fine old head on its strong throat and inclined his head reverently.

Raboun Bey stifled a yawn, he hoped ardently that the old man was not going to be wearyingly religious; to avert this tedious calamity he said gently:

"Is their aught, Excellency, you have to say to me of my daughter Fari?"

Hassenein's absorbed eyes glittered back to normal shrewdness; he had been grievously disquieted of late by reports of Hamid's infatuation for a white woman. Raboun Bey's veiled suggestion met with approval from him.

It was time Hamid married, and further, a more potent reason than any other of frailer portent, it would at such a juncture avert, very successfully, any undue political attention which the Government party might pay to Hamid; a man engrossed in marriage ceremonies would scarcely be suspected of plotting a riot; in any event, marriage celebrations would be an extremely good screen for Hamid's other and dangerous activities. Hassenein leant forward and said with extreme affability:

"My friend, what think you of a speedy marriage between your daughter and my dear son?"

Raboun, for once, made no effort to conceal his real feelings, he even stammered in his speech of agreement.

Hassenein grew even more gracious, he expanded into flowery prophecies, he unbent, indeed, to so great an extent, and pressed upon his guest gifts of such value that Raboun began to fear he would require a *dot* beyond his gift, and left at last the prey of an acute anxiety.

It was very hot in the little alley, and Raboun Bey pursued the even tenor of his way in search of shade; the street seemed deserted in the heat, but ahead an Englishman walked. Raboun Bey observed him with no interest from a distance, but as he looked, there was a little, sharp sound, and the Englishman fell forward on to his face.

Raboun Bey saw a dark head peer for a second from behind a wall, then it vanished; Raboun Bey imitated its example, but with greater leisure.

He retraced his steps and chose another street, and walked on meditating at peace; it was, of course, a pity that people had to be killed, it was a rude, crass method of settling life's difficulties, but unquestionably it gave the quietus of finality to any argument, which was invaluable in subduing an opponent's strength!

Personally, he detested violence and adored craft; he deplored in this moment old Hassenein's silly refusal (which had been meant to sting him with contempt, and had indeed roused contempt, but for Hassenein, and not against himself) to go for safety to the gorgeous villa on the Nile! . . . However! . . . Raboun was a fatalist, and therefore he did not believe in labouring any subject; he focused his deliberations on his daughter and on Hamid as a prospective husband.

Both cogitations called for philosophy, and one thing Raboun decided fervently: the marriage should take place at the earliest possible moment. If there *was* danger, and Hamid, who was quite foolish enough to mingle with it, was hurt, Raboun wanted no uncertain position for his daughter; Hamid's

affections might or might not be engaged, but Raboun intended he should be, and thereafter married with all possible speed.

Hassenein sat alone when Raboun had left him, then, summoning a servant, he sent him for Zachilinos, who, used to these commands, drove at once with all speed to the house of the high walls. Zachilinos was not afraid of Hassenein el Alim, but he had that uncomfortable respect for him which verges on fear.

He looked into the dark, fierce, old face, and felt he hated all Arabs; he loathed this secret house with its dim splendour and peopled silence, it made him feel little, and over-dressed, and shiny, and he stood fidgeting before Hassenein el Alim, who continued to stare at him with a sort of contemptuous interest.

Zachilinos had long since decided, if the revolution were a success, to squeeze from it every particle of benefit for himself, and, should the collective squeezing prove a sufficiently good yield, leave the employment of Hamid without farewell.

"What have you to say?" Hassenein el Alim shot at him suddenly.

"Excellency, the Prince Hamid dined yesterday evening with the English woman, Mrs. Cleveland, on the terrace at Shepheard's Hotel. Later, he drove her towards Girgeh, he returned at dawn——"

"He came from this English woman at dawn?" Hassenein interrupted.

"No, no, Excellency, he was at the Café Brijomb very late, there is a dancing girl there, Mercédès——"

Hassenein el Alim made a noise of contempt.

"This English woman, you think the Prince Hamid is enamoured of her?"

Zachilinos allowed himself to snigger.

"Oh, in Paris, Excellency, it was common talk. She is now to be divorced."

He stayed a little longer pouring into the ears of Hassenein el Alim, whose face gave no indication

whether he even heard or not, a chronicle of the petty doings of Hamid, of his small expenditures.

Suddenly, looking up, Hassenein said abruptly, "You can go."

Zachilinos bowed and departed; he peeped behind a wonderful carved screen in an ante room, and a giggle answered his daring; its abrupt cessation warned him a guardian might be near and prevented further example of his gallantry; he went out, blinking a little after the cool scented dimness of the house, despising his employers more heartily than before.

As if that hawk-nosed old fool could have any influence on Hamid's affairs—as if a man, living mewed up in that way, knew what life meant!

He giggled a little to himself, and as he giggled, at that moment, Hassenein el Alim was sending a messenger into the desert with an order to one of the Sheiks to prepare for battle; the order was one word, but it would suffice.

He saw the need for immediate action; Hamid had had a passion for white women before, but none had lasted, nor had any been a passion for a woman of the type Hassenein el Alim judged this woman to be whom Hamid had met in Paris and who had then followed him to Cairo, or to meet whom he had come thus early to Cairo himself.

A shaft of sunlight slid in between the slats of the jalousies; Hassenein's brilliant old eyes stared at it. He had been able once to stare into the sun . . . those had been days . . . he dreamed of desert days, of battles, of deaths, of games with death—which made life . . . all that was Western was effete, subordinate —over-civilized—it was impossible to know what power these white women had, and men of the East got a madness for them into their blood . . . Hamid might be wrecked in his career—supposing, as a man talks when drunk with love, he talked to this woman? Hassenein rose slowly to his great height, Hamid had

been the child of his old age, in this hour Hassenein grudged time its power.

He walked to the window and flung wide the jalousies and looked out over the city; the street was visible, with its burden of traffic. His eyes, which had once gazed into the sun, could see every detail now of each entrance, the features of the passers-by . . . he gazed with dispassionate yet real contempt at the cars, the telegraph wires visible in the distance, he loathed the progress which had given such things to the world.

He thought of the feel of a horse between a man's knees, and a shout dying in vast space; he thought of killing as a man kills with his hands—perhaps a knife. . . .

His son passed, driving in a car, and beside him the Englishwoman sat; the traffic slowed up, Hassenein had time to study her face; his own twitched with furious contempt, disgust; such a woman for Hamid, who was so strong he could lift a man his own size and throw him, who could ride an untamed desert horse, and break its back because it reared on him! . . .

This weakness, this sickly madness for white women came from those years spent in that cursed England.

Yet, it had had to be; no desert-bred man, had his strength been superhuman, could have broken the English rule in Egypt: to do that, to defeat the cunning of these Europeans, it had been necessary to learn their tricks.

Hamid had done this, Hassenein's heart swelled as he thought of Hamid's subtle achievements, his friendship with the English leaders here, their fondness for him, asking him to dine, to play their games of sport with them!

His thoughts sped inconsequently. . . . Where now was Hamid? Whither had he been going with the Englishwoman?

A savage, yet pitiable jealousy shook Hassenein —a jealousy which sprang from his overwhelming pride in his beautiful son, in his looks, his superb strength, his cleverness . . . all that, a sacrifice to that frail and evil white woman . . . he would marry Hamid to Fari at once, as soon as might be, and get him back so to himself.

And the Cairene rising should be soon, and if any woman suffered in it . . . it would be unfortunate, but white women should not come so much to Cairo.

He stood for a long time waiting, half wistfully, half with dread, to see the car go past again. It did not come.

At length he closed the jalousies and went back to his cushions.

Two hours they had been gone. . . .

CHAPTER XV

" Le caprice de notre humeur est encore plus bizarre que celui de la fortune! "

It was divinely beautiful, the desert world to which Hamid knew the entrance, to whose gates Caro and he flew as if upon the wind on their splendid horses.

A car, a train, a ride, then the desert, steeped in goldenness, in golden silence, golden mystery.

Caro had seen no "usual" desert, save in passing glimpses, Hamid had shown her the desert's reality, not its immemorial beauties.

"Later—you can see those—anyone could take you. I must take you here."

They seemed alone, shut in by goldenness, around, above, beneath.

Hamid broke the silence.

"The great caravans go there—to the north," he said.

"The great caravans! " . . . The words sang themselves, painted pictures with their letters, suggested the eternal East, the dead centuries . . . their trappings of glory.

"I should love to live in the desert, just for a little while," Caro said, "to live there really, I mean, to travel into it by camel, to pitch my tent."

Hamid turned to her, his face looked interested, his eyes intense, but he veiled them.

"Why not?" he asked gaily, drawing on his cigarette. "Why not? I could easily arrange it—you would take your maid—a friend, perhaps?"

"Do you mean it?" Caro asked, then she too laughed. "But, of course, it is a dream, lovely, but impossible!"

"Why?" Hamid asked simply.

Caro shrugged her shoulders.

"How could one? It isn't done—except in books—and then the hero or heroine never go back, they are absorbed, or they lose their guides, or who knows?" she looked up and laughed at him, "their guides lose them!"

"That would never happen to you," Hamid said quietly. "I would arrange everything."

"It is a dream," Caro said softly, "that is all. A dream of peace."

Hamid had been standing a little way away; now he closed the distance between them and stood so near to her that she unconsciously felt his nearness, as if it were a tangible thing, felt that odd, disturbing sense it is impossible for a woman to deny, when she knows a man loves her.

He said, on a challenging note:

"Why do you want peace?"

His words swept her away from him to John, to the loneliness of life she felt, and had felt so much more intensely, however illogically, since John and she had talked of his love for Victoria, since he had been so eager for freedom.

They had scarcely met since, she knew John had been returning almost at once; perhaps now he was already gone.

"Why do you want peace?" Hamid repeated.

Almost like a schoolgirl Caro longed to say, "I shan't tell you!" She recognized the weakness of the answer, but it expressed her mood; even to her nearest friend she could not talk of this break in her life, it was not in her to appeal for sympathy, and she knew if any were offered she would resent it: she had to fight things out alone.

Definitely she chose a subject.

"Excellency, there was a serious riot yesterday, I hear?"

His eyes met hers; he looked as though he were laughing in his mind. He said quite gravely:

"Of course. But what can you expect? There was no proof that the Englishman, Morden, was shot by Farzan! And all these men belong to tribes or sects, or clans—clubs even—so civilized are we to-day here in Cairo!—and at once a man's friends, be they only natives, fight his battles! You must not think," he added, "that the English alone know *esprit de corps*."

Caro looked at him in puzzled amazement; she began quietly:

"But it was deliberate murder——" then she stopped, and she could not have said at that moment why she stopped, but it was as if within the space and the tranquillity and friendliness, a sinister warning quivered.

"One can't discuss it," she ended lamely.

"It is very sad, and very, very regrettable," Hamid said smoothly, he went on a little hesitatingly: "One should not speak of these things, but, lest you should misunderstand me on this matter, think me perhaps the victim of a national prejudice, some friends and I have added our names to the list of subscribers for the widow. She was an Egyptian girl, you know. Yes, it is rather surprising, is it not? But sometimes Englishmen do marry Egyptian girls. I believe Morden and his wife were very happy."

There was a pause, and then he said, his voice utterly changed:

"Look," he pointed with his riding-whip to the East, and just then, faint yet distinct, a cry rose into the air.

Quite simply Hamid knelt, his eyes closed, his hands pressed against his sides, his lips moved in prayer.

His attitude, its simplicity, the gentleness it conveyed somehow, the wonderfully clear light, that last light of day pouring over him, his bared head, the shadow of the lashes on his face, woke a

curious tenderness in Caro; a little while before his nationality had antagonized her, now this sign and symbol of it touched her. And Hamid's attitude, his disarming boyishness recalled to her that other man which was Hamid too, who had knelt, not in prayer, but before her, in the woods at Versailles.

Hamid's eyes opened, he looked straight at her as one does look when the mind is wholly relaxed, openly, with the frankness which reveals the heart.

* * * * *

It was late when they drove up to the hotel, and as Caro ran on to her room, John rose from his solitary table and called to her.

She waited for him in the big lounge; it was the strangest experience to see him so, like a stranger, to feel it wiser to meet him in a crowd.

He came up to her, he looked a little flushed, perhaps embarrassed, and his voice was rather strained as he said:

"Look here, Caro, I just waited to say this—hope you won't feel—er—that I'm—I'm pushing in—— It's only this: you mustn't go about so much with that Egyptian feller. One hears things—I can't tell you, you must try to trust me. I thought you'd better know."

"Yes, but what?" Caro asked slowly. She was smiling at him faintly.

John's flush deepened.

"You know what I mean! It isn't done, that's all; an Englishwoman going off every day with one of the natives, prince or no prince."

A white-hot anger was flaming in Caro beneath her assumption of half-bored amusement.

"Your belated solicitude is very touching?" she drawled.

John gave a little, angry laugh.

"I might have known you'd take it this way! I

waited to—oh! I dunno, it really doesn't matter. I'm off to-morrow anyway. This is good-bye."

Despite her fury of resentment something ached in Caro at that word—good-bye—like this, in an hotel, after everything!

"Good-bye," she said mechanically; John took her hand, he said very shyly:

"Caro, it wasn't—well, just the usual sort of thing that made me want to warn you about Prince el Alim; he's suspected too, by our crowd."

Caro laughed in her turn.

"El Alim, who is half English by inclination, who has lived most of his life in London and Paris—I have always heard our administration was stupid, I believe it now!"

John, his quick temper flaring uncontrollably at this indirect hit to his vanity, said carelessly:

"Serious as all that with you?" and turned on his heel; he regretted the brutal bad taste of the remark at once, but Caro had vanished; the argument was a useless one, and besides, his Englishness, which Rita would have understood so well, urged him to contemptuous scorn.

"Good Lord, a *native* chap, however—wherever educated!"

His mind reverted to his plans, to the thought he was going back, back to Victoria, who was nineteen and a little sport, not an atom of damn cleverness in her, bless her!

He walked under the golden stars, biting on his cigar, wishing fervently he could make the years go back, and start perfectly fair again.

Caro saw him from her window; she was tempted to call his name, to "make it up" before he went.

She saw his face for a moment in the flare of a passing car; it was smiling, and she knew that smile: she had been feeling lonely, she felt lonelier now.

CHAPTER XVI

"Thy hand my hand,
Thine eyes my eyes,
All of thee
Caught and confused with me:
My hand thy hand,
My eyes thine eyes,
All of me
Sunken and discovered anew in thee . . ."

—JOHN FREEMAN.

SFORZA dined with his brother in the restaurant; it was quite cool there, and most public.

"The very place to show you off, Roberto," he said, faintly smiling.

"I shall have to clean myself up no end," Robert had responded.

"Cleaned up" he faced Sforza across the table, scarlet flowers and a scarlet lamp between them, and around them much curiosity.

Visitors, whispering, learnt the tall, slight, dark young man was "Essex," stared at him eagerly; the head waiter hovered solicitously.

"In one moment the band will play 'See the Conquering Hero Comes'," Sforza murmured.

"More likely, 'Here we are, here we are, here we are again'," Robert said tersely.

"I am laden with questions for you to answer," Sforza said. "I wrote them down, and perhaps you will read them later and write your answers?"

"All right," Robert answered; he said lazily: "I only came back yesterday from a desert trip—found a new oasis."

"Only that?"

"Oh, yes, lots of other things, trouble included.

That was why I came in here. I say, Giovanni, d'you know Prince Hamid el Alim?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I nearly battered his face in once."

"Oh, you know him well then, that's splendid. Pity you didn't finish the job off."

Sforza's quiet eyes rested on his brother's dark face.

"Why?"

"He is too powerful here, and out there," he moved his head slightly, and Sforza knew he meant in the desert.

"I could not understand why I should be the recipient of so much attention from his adherents; I do now."

"I am not sure el Alim knows you and I are related," Sforza replied composedly.

Robert flung back his head and laughed with genuine delight, his teeth a white line in his face.

"My dear chap, our mutual friend knows everything: he has enough money to subsidize an army of spies, and no man spies so patiently, so meticulously, and with such real heart-felt pleasure as your Oriental! It's meat and drink to 'em. This'll give you an idea perhaps—and you'll remember, won't you, I've been a caravan man for the last six weeks? There's a very lovely lady called Mrs. Cleveland, isn't there? And you know her, and el Alim does, and she's divorcing her husband, and she——"

Sforza held up a hand.

"One moment, all you say is correct. Gossip could have spread each item of that information. If you learn so much from the natives, how was it you had not heard of my encounter with el Alim?"

Robert laughed again; he laughed like a boy, infectiously.

"One secret an Arab always keeps—the secret of

his own defeat! Give me that list of questions, will you? I'll run through it now."

"I wrote them in Italian," Sforza said. "I thought it safer."

Robert nodded, his smooth head was bent; Sforza noted a long scar starting just below his collar; it showed red and angry still.

"You've had rather a nasty cut on your neck," he said.

Robert looked up and grinned.

"One of your friend's friends! He is another who won't talk of my defeat, however, or, indeed, be very chatty any more. He tried to get me. I got him."

Sforza looked at him under troubled brows.

"You must have had a serious fight?"

"The vultures did well," Robert murmured. He was an extraordinary mixture of British phlegm and Latin nonchalance; he would have commanded an English regiment superbly and been adored by every man in it. In the war, though, he had fought exclusively in Egypt, helped to look after the Gurkhas.

He lifted his eyes from the long paper.

"I'll answer the questions in Italian; you translate 'em for Lord Wegorne and burn the paper to-night." He stopped, drummed with his finger-tips on the table; he seemed to be considering the decoration of the big room, finally he said:

"There is going to be one of the most serious riots in Cairo in a few weeks, perhaps next week, unless a miracle happens. I do not see how it can be averted. El Alim has planned it, but has kept himself so out of the movement that it would be impossible to bring it home to him. To arrest him on suspicion would be the signal for a revolution to-day, and the revolutionaries would massacre our troops, because they are so scattered. I am returning to the desert. I can do no good here, there I can at least help a little. The plan is to detach as many men

from the main defence force by desert battles—I mean to frustrate that if I can. You'd better get out, Giovanni, get home. It isn't your affair, anyway."

Sforza looked at him and smiled.

"I sometimes wonder what *is* my affair!"

"To settle down, marry, and have a son, just like yourself!" Robert leaned forward. "Why haven't you married?" Then he added in a totally different voice, looking beyond Sforza, far into the restaurant: "I say, there's a beautiful woman—coming in now—alone."

Sforza knew it was Caro before he turned, but automatically he looked over his shoulder. Of course it was she.

"Good Lord, what a beauty!" Robert went on frankly. "All England, all springtime, isn't she? She makes one think of wild flowers, and exotic ones! D'you know her, Giovanni?"

"It is Mrs. Cleveland," Sforza said quietly.

Robert echoed the name in genuine amazement. "*The* Mrs. Cleveland, d'you mean? The woman who is so keen on that sweep el Alim?"

"Whom report says is admired by el Alim," Sforza said aloofly; his heart felt as if a hand had caught it and was squeezing it of its life-blood.

Robert was not looking at him, scarcely listening in the sense of weighing an utterance with a view to answering it; rather, he continued his own line of thought.

"Oh, it's true all right. They ride together each day into the desert. He's utterly mad about her; these men are sometimes, white women are their one weakness, almost a disease with them. I suppose he could marry her, but he won't."

Sforza forced himself to say, "Why?"

Robert looked at him now and laughed.

"Why should he? The mere fact that Englishwomen, Frenchwomen, allow an Arab to make love to them robs them of their worth in his eyes. The

Western habit of life does that as well. An ordinary Englishman cannot grasp the Oriental's idea about white women. It seems paradoxical to him, that one of these men, an Arab, will commit any crime to win a woman he does not respect, nor intend to live with long! Yet the Arab's creed is the least paradoxical of any. Women have no value for him save as he values them, and his valuation is that he would place upon any entertainment. His whole nature draws its qualities from a mainspring of personal secrecy; his belongings are for him alone; our woman's freedom simply implies licence to him; his translation of the word 'belonging' is despotism, benevolent if you like, but absolute. Rebellion against that, which every white woman would show, is a great part of his pleasure in her"—he looked with a certain eagerness at Sforza. "You simply do not understand, you visitors here, even men who live here do not; but if you go amongst the Arabs as one of themselves"—he half closed his eyes—"then you understand." He took a cigarette from Sforza's case, his glance wandered to Caro again. "Seems incredible, looking at such a woman—that particular, finely cut type of loveliness—that she should care for an Arab. It's amazing, and amazingly interesting."

He had the impersonal, yet vivid interest of the scientist in his voice, who dissects for knowledge.

"D'you know her, Giovanni?"

"Oh, yes," Sforza answered; "rather well. Shall I ask if I may introduce you?"

They walked together to Caro's table, she looked up, and her eyes smiled at them before her lips.

"She likes old Giovanni," Robert decided in his mind, and a little of the faint prejudice he had felt faded.

Sforza bowed formally, as formally he asked Caro's leave to present his brother. It was Robert who suggested they should order coffee for Mrs. Cleveland and stay and share it.

"I'll ask the man to bring us a special sort," he said pleasantly. "This is very jolly of you, Mrs. Cleveland; Giovanni and I were getting very bored with one another."

"We are together so often," Sforza supplemented gravely, meeting Robert's mood, despite his own heaviness of spirit, and influenced too, unable to resist the influence rather, of joy, that even being near to Caro gave him; it might be a joy which hurt, but its pleasure outweighed its pain. He was telling himself in his heart that he never had had the hope of winning her, and now this news of her impending freedom in no way helped his own cause.

There would still have been the months in Paris with Hamid el Alim.

Uselessly he let himself wonder what he had been doing then—simply "putting in time" in Rome—it seemed amazing, to-night, that there should ever have been a time he had not known Caro lived, had not felt the knowledge of her in his own life, in every heart-beat, every nerve. . . .

Robert was making a rather bad "gaffe." Sforza had been looking at Caro, barely hearing their conversation, now the word "child" held his attention; he heard her say "No," and in that instant he was furiously grateful to life, he felt, gazing at her, that it would have been intolerable had she borne any man a child—that, at least, had been spared him.

Then his thoughts coiled back on him, stinging him in the rebound. What right under Heaven had he to think such thoughts—about a woman who cared not at all for him, scarcely recognized him in deep friendship—was—if Robert were right, and Sforza had never known him to gossip or be inaccurate in his knowledge—in love with this Egyptian, Hamid el Alim?

Beneath the mask of duly responsive interest it was as if a tongue of flame shot from Sforza's heart, consuming away the gentleness, the kindliness of his

nature. He thought of Hamid with murderous longing, until his throat tightened, and he felt his fingers bruising the palms of his hands.

He looked down unobtrusively, and freed his hands from their grip, opening them with difficulty. With a great effort he got a hold upon himself.

Caro was talking of the desert. Simply, the sound of her voice flowed over him like healing water. He let himself look at her, at her slender hands. Her wedding ring was barely visible—it was nearly hidden by a carved sapphire. She had beautiful slender hands, but they were nervous to-night, for some reason—never still. Sforza's gaze rose to her throat. He never remembered to have seen a woman with so fair a skin. It was almost startlingly white against the black lace of her gown, and as he looked at the tiny shadowed hollow in her throat he thought of a Japanese poem he had read once under the plum trees in the streets of Sakata, with the plum blossom silting down on the pages of the book, rose-white petals on whiter parchment. . . . His old Japanese tutor had lifted a petal, and, holding it against the strong sunlight had said:

"It is in the poem that the sunshine on flower petals is as a lover's kiss upon a woman's throat."

Caro's throat was a white blossom—under whose kisses had it burnt? Her husband's? That self-satisfied, blatant boy's? He would not let himself think further. His mental vision forced before him a face upon which he would not let his thoughts dwell definitely. He made himself lean forward and ask Caro some trivial question.

Soon it was time for Robert and him to leave her. They took her to the lift and stood beside her, waiting till it should come. Caro looked past them out into the night.

"What a divine night," she said. There was wistfulness, something else too, in her voice.

Robert said instantly:

"Do send for a cloak and let Giovanni and me take you a little walk—a drive, if you would prefer it?"

"I should love it," Caro assented at once. She told a page to go up and ask her maid to bring her down a cloak. Saria came with a soft blue satin wrap which had a big dark fur collar. Sforza spoke to her for a moment—Saria and he had often talked in Paris.

"*Com e sta,* Saria?" he asked, smiling a little.

Saria's command of languages had been an unfailing delight to Tim. She watched the three of them walk out together.

She did not know an Italian, French or Arabic expression which exactly fitted the occasion or her mood, but in English she thought, "He'd do."

It was lovely out of doors after the scorching day. Even Sforza felt less tormented: the peace and sweetness of the night, the little sense of intimacy it bestowed, tranquillized him. Robert and he walked on either side of Caro. Sometimes Caro's arm touched his.

He let Robert talk, and surrendered himself to the magic of those slight touches. To him the night seemed like a great tenderness wrapping Caro and himself about. He had never thought that love could be like this, so supreme a thing, so vast, that every least insignificance connected with the loved woman counted.

All the days he had gone hoping, longing, secretly aware that the corner of each street had value—she might be just beyond it. . . . He had haunted the hotel, yet seen her seldom. Now he was here, beside her, and the fragrance of her, the mystery, encompassed him about.

Robert was talking of the desert. He was speaking tensely, and Caro was answering him eagerly. He was speaking of riding there, and, as Robert spoke again, with amazement Sforza recognized a

complete alteration in his voice; it held a sort of stifled contempt, and he said carelessly:

"Oh, yes, I have met Prince Hamid el Alim. A fine horseman, isn't he?" He added after a short pause: "Have you been out to his villa yet? He has a marvellous one, I believe, and a dahabeeyah and every possible other luxury. His old father, the Sheik Hassenein el Alim, prefers to live in the desert. He is a rabid hater of all things and people English, and quite sincere about it, which is a blessing! He lives almost a barbaric life still, I believe."

Caro branched off into a new question:

"What life d'you lead, Mr. Essex?"

Robert's voice grew interested again instantly. He gave a little laugh as he answered:

"As nearly barbaric as possible! I'm a romantic being, Mrs. Cleveland, an irreclaimable nomad, asking only space, the stars, and dreams——"

"With an occasional scrap there—just to keep the blood warm?" Sforza suggested.

"'Man cannot live by bread alone,'" Robert retorted.

They had wandered into a street which, empty upon their entrance, now became suddenly thronged by a running crowd, shouting, screaming; a man carrying a torch tore ahead, yelling one word as he ran.

Robert looked round, a doorway was, he knew, there. He pushed his hand against the door; it swung inwards. Instantly, without speaking, he entered, and pulled Caro towards him, Sforza followed her and stood, filling the doorway, his back to the street. The place where they were was still and close and very dark. None of them spoke. The noise outside was deafening; it showed no signs of abating. Robert whispered finally:

"They are paid insurgents—men drafted in. They are given drink to inflame them, then turned loose on to the streets."

A woman's shriek cut the air; a woman's voice called in English: "Help! Help!"

"Stay here," Sforza said to Caro. "Robert, stay with her." He was gone.

Robert whistled under his breath, then went on humming—a little, silly tune with no real lilt to it. The clamour of the streets was frightful. Sforza did not return.

Under her breath, her fingers crisping, Caro murmured: "Where is he?"

Either Robert did not hear, or he was too anxious to answer. They waited again in silence.

Caro felt extraordinary. It was as if her heart were beating in her throat. This place, her presence here, Robert's, Sforza's danger, were like actions in a nightmare. Nothing seemed real, and she felt paralysed with terror.

It was as if Sforza had become someone else, and yet stayed unquestionably himself—his absence, his safety, meant incredibly much—a thousand tiny details connected with him leapt to Caro's mind—Robert's voice of friendliness calling him "Giovanni," his still, dark face, his mat of hair which looked so well brushed and smooth, but had looked so fiercely alive once when his horse had bolted with him and tried to throw him in the Bois. How long ago all that seemed . . . and it had not mattered then. . . .

Yet in this hour everything connected with Sforza mattered.

Involuntarily her hands went to her heart, and then, despite the darkness, to her face. The blood burnt there, flamed. With a smothered cry she turned as the door swung against her, and caught hold of Sforza closely.

"You—you are safe?" she stammered, forgetting caution, Robert; forgetting, mercifully, herself.

Sforza put his hands up over hers, as gently released her clasp.

"Of course, I am safe," he said quietly. He laughed a little. "I enjoyed the scrap!"

Robert broke in discontentedly:

"You had all the luck in being nearest the door! D'you think it is safe for us to go now?"

Sforza looked out. His form was silhouetted for an instant in the opening.

"What on earth have you got on?" Robert asked. He put out a hand and pulled at the heavy cloak.

"I borrowed this burnous from an unfortunate gentleman who had more temper than manners: my need was greater than his; besides, he tried to kill me, strangle me, and I hate undue familiarity."

He sounded gayer than Caro remembered hearing him since they had met again. He sounded like the other Sforza who had taken her riding, filled her room with rose-geraniums and raced with Tim, taught him to fence and box.

Robert's careless question, "Get hurt?" brought her back from the bitter-sweet past to the disturbed present.

"Very slightly," Sforza said in Italian quietly, then louder he added: "Shall we venture? I think it will be quite all right."

They walked into the now deserted street. From a distance there came the sound of shots, then silence again.

At the hotel both men kissed Caro's hand. Robert's kiss, a dim reminder of his adored Italian mother, was gaily punctilious, a little exaggerated because he felt gauche, if it were possible for him to feel so, at least, or perhaps he felt merely a little self-conscious.

As she turned to bid Sforza good-night Caro felt that shiver of perverse nervousness shake her, which makes a lover, who has been waiting long, desire to turn and fly when the beloved appears at last! Her earlier love-life had been so simple, so expected in

a sense, that this confusion of herself amazed her, frightened her almost.

Sforza took her hand and lifted it to his lips. His kiss was an obligatory courtesy, no more: then he turned and went.

In her own room Caro tried to laugh, to feel contempt for herself. John had left her, and she had fallen in love with a man who did not want her!

The situation was pitiably ironic, and she pictured herself figuring in it as a comic tragedienne. Her pride flamed and her heart ached unbearably; the only slight consolation she had was the knowledge that Sforza himself was the last man on earth to believe a woman loved him. His withheldness, coupled with a definite generosity of outlook, which was so strong a characteristic, inspired trust. It suggested that inbred gentleness of consideration which makes women feel sheltered and at perfect ease, which makes them, too, be at their best because they have been credited unhesitatingly with possessing the finest qualities.

"That I did not know—that I never guessed," Caro said to herself despairingly.

What a fool she had been in those blue-and-golden days in Paris when Sforza had been near to her. She knew it now; he had been near, but had hidden his nearness because she had not been free. She knew quite certainly his was that type of nature which, failing to obtain its heart's desire, would take no other, would go to any length to stifle an affection which could never mature. He would repress himself from loyalty to her, to himself—from a strong belief in the necessity of a free life.

In those summer days, starred now immemorially with memories as hauntingly sweet as the jasmine Sforza had brought so often as an offering, he had nearly cared, realized the futility, pulled up and forgotten. For here, on the few occasions when they

had met, he had been distant and a little distrait—to-night he had been utterly aloof.

"Who cares? I *will* not care," Caro told herself with bitter wretchedness. She felt desperately unhappy. John's flamboyant care-freeness, the happiness he barely troubled to conceal at the thought of his return, his brusque forgetfulness of everything. . . . Caro had long ceased to love him, but memories of him she still loved, and those throbbed now with the pain of his heedless hardness, his genuine forgetfulness.

A woman can forgive everything save forgetfulness. There is no humiliation greater than to be forgotten, and none so merciless.

As long as a woman can feel: "He was unfaithful, but the hours we spent together meant as much to him as to me," her position is not intolerable, but to know that the grace of those hours has been swept away utterly is knowledge which binds a suffering brow with a crown of thorns.

"I am a weak fool to be so humiliated. It is pitifully small of me," Caro told herself, and suffered just as much.

The appalling blankness of life frightened her suddenly. She wished she were back in London, or with the Tempests. She made up her mind to return to them, then to go on to England, and take up life resolutely again. After all, she had heaps of friends . . . the world was large . . . there must be romance, loveliness somewhere. . . .

A sort of restrained rage shook her because of her own unhappiness, her ineffectuality.

"Everything has been such a failure—John, I—my friendships even——"

She was amazed at the intricacy of life, which had once seemed so straightforward. Appalled, too, at the power of finality which dogged events in life.

Yet some people went on in happiness, their lives knew no crises, no sudden rendings—Rita Tempest,

for instance—it was impossible to think of her being forgotten, figuring in any weary scandal.

Caro leant out of the window. Her sense of almost passionate fairness made her struggle to see this matter clearly.

Was it that she herself made impossible demands in life, required of it too much adventure, brought to it too little tranquillity, or was it that Rita had a great sense of values in acceptance? That simplicity of gratitude which makes other people's lives so much happier, which gives to those other people a belief in their power to bring happiness?

John and she had hunted happiness, hunted it down, and killed it at the last; Rita accepted as happiness the offerings each day brought her. John and she had never done that. The word "content" to them had seemed a silly acceptance of mediocrity, the adoption of it, the encouragement of it in their lives would have aroused self-contempt. They had been eminently content with themselves, but not with life, and neither had ever troubled to realize, Caro saw now, that self-content renders futile the gifts other people offer.

She put up both hands and thrust them into her hair.

"Oh, I don't know," she said aloud despairingly.

She was perilously near to tears . . . only five years before she had believed John's love to be eternal: it had failed utterly.

"Everything does, everything will," she told herself, "everything——" As she spoke the cry of the muezzin, bidding the faithful pray, rose in the still, cold air, faint, yet strangely distinct, as only sounds breaking the night's silence can be. It struck into Caro's mind, as it struck into a breaking dawn, surely, disintegratingly, seeming to thrust into weary disillusion, tired self-questioning, the knowledge of things faithful and eternal, of serenity and hope.

CHAPTER XVII

"Il n'y a que l'imagination qui échappe pour toujours à la satiété."—STENDHAL.

A DAY still held possibilities, the chance of something new. Even the sword of disenchantment possesses that other edge: if it cuts away happiness it leaves the shorn and empty path. Once you know that you are desolate, you are also free, and adventure, which no happy person needs, beckons to the disenchanted, aware its lure will be regarded if only to "fill in the time," to people loneliness.

Caro opened wide, green eyes upon a heavenly day, sparkling gold and white, upon mauve orchids and Saria's cheerful morning face and trim, rustling form, and Fleet's aspiring inquiry.

He was lifted on to the bed and sat there, surveying Caro and the toast with equal love. Saria moved about the room preparing Caro's clothes and offering caustic comment on the habits and appearance of foreign waiters. It was Saria's fate to be admired by braided commissionaires and the higher liveried officials—a fate she bore with repartee and repetition: "Friends, if you like, monsieur," accompanied by the sterile smile of the wholly unimpressed. Carletto in Paris had suffered nearly unto madness through Saria's unfailing kindliness.

"Give me the English," Saria opined now, never having liked specially any Englishman, but stung to that ardent patriotism only contrast can induce. "When I think!" . . . She thought in silence whilst laying out for Caro a lime-coloured muslin dress with which were to be worn bronze shoes and palely golden stockings, and a hat which was of

golden transparent straw and had a wreath of clearest green leaves on it.

Caro watched her idly, whilst Fleet cleared up all signs of breakfast with more pleasure than evidence, or sound, rather, of good manners.

Saria flung Floris' best effort of rose-geranium into the bath, and the room was filled with the clean, sharp scent, and with the sunshine and soft breeze pouring in through the windows.

"Something nice ought to happen to-day," Caro said lazily. "It's such a sweet day."

"So it is, so it should, ma'am," Saria responded instantly. She welcomed this mood with real gladness. The days of late had not gone clad in coloured gaiety at all. There had been those long silences in the "dressing-times," and those pale lilac shadows each morning beneath her mistress's eyes which had betokened sleeplessness. Saria had never asked about the sleeplessness; that was against her code. She had simply stayed up night after night as late as ever she could, talking with her mistress, knowing that when she went there was little chance of rest, and therefore beguiling all the time she could. Fleet, equally devoted, but less observant, had stayed up too, asleep in his arm-chair. Saria had seen John, of course, and he had stumbled a sentence beginning "S'pose you know," and Saria had felt for him that half-pitying, half-exasperated tolerance women do feel for men because they are only rarely wholly aware of the hurt they cause.

In her own mind Saria considered it a good thing Mr. Cleveland had "gone for good." To herself she argued "a man who'll not be faithful during the first five years of his marriage, when his wife's beautiful, and they've everything anyone can want, isn't going to turn out a model husband in the second five. He's begun as he means to go on, and nice goings-on there'll be!"

Saria had loved the first years of the Cleve-

land marriage—they had both been so young, so absurd, so earnest about nothing, and so self-absorbed; very like entirely charming, but spoilt, children; but she had viewed John's delinquencies almost with terror. Hers had not been that faith which was of herculean power; it had been the extremely human one which had realized there is a limitation to endurance, and when youth, loveliness and spoiltness are in the question, that endurance will not be of long duration: it had not been.

The first year of disillusion at home had been the worst, but these last months had not been easy; now, at any rate, things were over, finished, and life had to be faced anew.

"I'd go on a nice expedition, ma'am, to the Sphinx or Pyramids," Saria suggested, "I'm going with another maid on a donkey with a party; they say it's historic and enjoyable."

Caro agreed that it had this reputation; through cigarette smoke she visioned Hamid and herself surveying the Sphinx in like manner, in the presence of countless tourists . . . her smile was not occasioned by the tourists, but by the thought of Hamid's deathless scorn of such contemplation. . . . !

"Prince el Alim is going to take me to see the Sphinx some night," she said aloud.

Saria looked dubious.

"They seem rather a mafficking sort about here at night, ma'am: the head-porter was telling me these riots have been more serious than we have known—still, perhaps his Excellency being a native gentleman——"

She left the sentence unfinished, and Caro was aware her mind had received a distinct shock—"a native gentleman"! She might evade the direct title, but the fact was indisputable, and it suggested Rita's low-voiced ridicule . . . John's arrogance of outlook. . . .

"I'll get up, I think," she said.

When she was dressed she went down to the terrace. Of course, by this time she knew a certain number of people : she had been certain to meet some of the cosmopolitan acquaintances who strew the path of any habitual traveller; she greeted one or two women, promised to make a fourth at bridge that evening in Lady Warre's sitting-room, and was preparing to settle down to a book in the shade when Hamid el Alim rode up : he was splendidly mounted and in his white riding kit he looked extraordinarily handsome; he waved his whip to some French people and called a greeting. He seemed this morning very European indeed, as he dismounted and ran up the steps; his riding breeches were Conduit Street pre-eminently, there was a London air about him.

He sat down and smiled at Caro.

"Look here, I have a rather marvellous plan—at least—you must think so, please, if you can! A friend of mine has to travel to Tiflis, he has business there, and he has offered me his villa for a time. It is below Luxor, and really beautiful—I hope you would think so at least! There are orange groves there, and rose gardens; he has great rose interests in Persia. Directly Mir Jokim told me of his expedition I thought perhaps you might profit by it. I would arrange your journey, you could go partly by train, partly by dahabeeyah if you liked. It is, I think, a great chance of seeing the desert, and you have said you wished to do so. You will be quite safe at the Villa Zohra."

"What a curious name," Caro said, repeating it.

Hamid was lighting a cigarette; through the little flame of the light he looked at Caro; it was unlikely she would know Persian mythology; he said airily :

"I think Zohra was a Persian Goddess or something. Mir Jokim is a poetic soul; he has lived in Paris a great deal; he married a French woman, I believe."

Hamid's beliefs were of that comparatively elastic

order which allowed him to substitute possibilities for facts; Mir Jokim had furnished his villa for a Frenchwoman, and a Frenchwoman had been sincerely loved by him; there the truth ended and Hamid's glossary began. "The villa has a bathroom," he went on, "and every modern luxury, and of course," he looked up between his thick eyelashes —"a staff of servants."

Caro said hesitatingly:

"I don't think I could stay there alone with my maid very well."

Hamid laughed.

"Of course, that you must decide. But you would live in a villa in Sorrento alone, would you not? or in any other place—why not here? It is the usual thing. You will, of course, have a guide, a good dragoman. It really is a chance, a rather wonderful chance, and I shall be within a few hours' distance. I could accompany you on your desert trips. I shall not unfortunately be alone, but with a party, but we could ride together——" he considered the vivid street, his face expressive of half-amused irritation. "I thought you would like my plan," he added ruefully, "I hoped so most eagerly."

He was like a boy who has been punished for some reason he does not understand; he waited a moment, then said very low, very deliberately, and smiling doubtfully, anxiously:

"Do come."

"I should love to—you have no idea how your wonderful proposal tempts me, and it was so kind of you to think first of me—you must have so many friends who would simply jump at such a chance——"

"You must come—you will," Hamid said, his voice shook a very little over the entreaty. "Think of the rides we could have—think of the freedom, the beauty . . . I assure you, it *is* beautiful beyond all telling—— One little week—I would look after you so well . . . whenever I could leave my party."

The reiteration of that thought, that Hamid would be "with a party" was somehow reassuring to Caro, and she longed to go: the idea held promise of enchantment, of self-forgetfulness; she had always felt the keenest wish to see one of those wonderful villas, stay in one, on the banks of the Nile, go in a dahabeeyah, ride in the desert; the idea had all the irresistible charm of the utterly unknown for a very matured mind, a mind which craved new vision, and craved it especially now, in this hour when all things habitual and old had failed.

Every woman perhaps, who has the sense of adventure, yearns to travel in the desert; there is about the word a sense of unfathomable romance, the fascination of the fairy stories of one's childhood. . . . !

"I will go—I must," Caro told herself. Should she ask some woman to go with her? If she did, it would spoil her own enjoyment: she longed to go, and to go alone.

After all, why not? She was free; no one cared—a chill bitterness descended on her as she thought how very little anyone cared now. It was being absurdly puritanical to debate the question in this way with Hamid, she turned towards him with sudden decision.

"I shall love to go to the Villa Zohra, I think. I was stupid to hesitate! Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity!"

"Splendid!" Hamid exclaimed. "Really excellent, as we used to say at Balliol. Now we will arrange details. When will you start? Shall I wire now? I must give a day's notice, you see! Let us think—to-day is Tuesday, you will go on Thursday, yes?"

"Yes," Caro agreed. Now that she had decided definitely she longed, too, to start.

Hamid made plans, wrote telegrams, notes; they lunched together on the terrace, and over their bird

and white wine and iced fruit talked about the desert, the Nile, rose gardens, the villa, the villa, the villa!

Caro did not realize that her heart's chagrin was mainly responsible for this feverish interest—that this yearning to escape from herself, this change was alluring because it held movement, and a spirit which is unhappy can bear inertia less well than any other thing.

Hamid left her absorbed in the thought, intent on departure, and Caro ran into her room calling for Saria, who rose, cool and interested.

"Something nice, ma'am?" she asked.

"An adventure—the expedition! Saria, we leave for a villa in the desert early on Thursday morning!"

Saria said with restraint which she would be long in equalling:

"I'll start packing now."

Caro laughed like a little girl.

"Saria, you are marvellous, and never failing! Isn't it exciting—aren't you excited?"

"It's wonderful, ma'am," Saria responded with truth, her chief feeling one of stricken wonder. "How did you think of it, ma'am?"

"Prince el Alim came to offer me the loan of a friend's villa, it has rose gardens and an orange grove, and is on the border of the Nile and the desert!"

"It's got everything," Saria observed sapiently; in her own mind she was debating many things, first and foremost if the "native gentleman" were to accompany the party?

Suspense was alien to Saria's nature; she inquired straight away:

"Are we going alone, ma'am?"

"Oh, yes," Caro said as carelessly as possible. "But we shall have a guide, and so on, and there is a staff of servants at the villa. It once had a French mistress."

"Civilized then, ma'am, I take it," Saria sug-

gested. "It'll be a wonderful experience, there's no denying. I'd no idea roses and oranges grew in the desert, I thought it was a waste, so to speak."

"The Villa Zohra has a gorgeous garden—the banks of the Nile are exceedingly fertile," Caro said, feeling rather as if she were reading from a primer.

"So I've heard, ma'am," Saria responded crushingly. "This villa seems situated in just the right spot."

Her mind was not yet at rest—Saria had suspected, in the terms of free speech, "a catch" somewhere, she awaited revelation, while counting over the handkerchiefs.

None came.

"He'll turn up," Saria told herself with a sigh.

* * * * *

"Of course," Caro said to herself, "one need not discuss one's plans with everyone in the hotel!" No guest therefore suffered from the breakdown of Caro's reticence, for she mentioned the desert visit to no one save the manager, when she told him what luggage she wished to leave with him.

Only one incident occurred which robbed the adventure of some radiance: John appeared, travelling cap in hand, at the door of her suite.

"By chance, I heard Fregori say you were leaving for the desert, telling a porter about your trunks. It is true, then; you are packing, I see."

Caro smiled at him frankly.

"Do you expect me to congratulate you on your astuteness?"

He made an impatient movement.

"Caro, where are you going?"

"I am leaving for the desert, you yourself tell me so."

John said:

"I suppose you have heard there's a good deal of

unrest just now?" He took a step forward. "Don't be idiotic—don't go."

Caro gave the frank laugh of extreme irritation.

"I seem fated to echo your own words! Do not be idiotic yourself; but *do* go, please!"

He flushed scarlet, hesitated, swung round on his heel; then he turned, still too young to resist the pleasure of the last word.

"Prince el Alim—of course, you know he's suspect by our Government? I saw you motoring with him yesterday, but after the rebuff I received I made no sign! However, in your present mood I don't suppose anything that matters concerns you much."

He was gone and the door slammed.

Sforza had the misfortune to make the second attack. John had met him in the lounge, and one of those impulses which so often made him, or wrecked him, urged him to say:

"I'm off, back to England. By the way, Marchese, you're a great pal of the Tempests, of my wi—of Mrs. Cleveland's too, aren't you? I hear she's going to the desert. I don't think it's safe. If you see her use your influence?"

"I fear I have none," Sforza answered quietly. He did not like John; under the circumstances that would have been impossible, but he appreciated certain qualities he had, and he was aware this young man was attracted to him.

"What's your brother think of the situation?" John asked bluntly.

"He has returned to his camp," Sforza replied.

John nodded; he shook hands with Sforza and went on his way, anathematizing him vaguely in his mind for a "close-mouthed Johnnie."

When he had gone Sforza resumed his seat, he sat forward, his slender, nervous hands clasped between his knees; he sat so until Caro came out from the lift.

When she saw him a gorgeous colour flooded

her face for an instant, then faded very swiftly. She knew her heart leapt, then it seemed to fall back, a dead weight in her breast, for one agonizing moment the love she felt for Sforza filled every crevice of her consciousness, then she became her own again, and because of that moment—an inevitable result of it—herself on the defensive, Sforza became a being to guard against.

He came forward and took her hand and her heart sang again at his touch.

"I must be mad—I am," Caro told herself, aghast at her impotence.

And Sforza felt her passion without knowing that he felt it; he, too, would have deemed himself insane had be believed Caro cared for him, but in that moment when she called to him, every thought of his spirit, every beat of his blood was a cry to her.

The unhurrying, careless crowd passed near them, the savour of many scents was about them, it was the usual world that both had known and accepted always, but they two stood alone until Sforza said at last, controlling his voice so much it sounded expressionless:

"It is very fine day."

Perhaps some poet who can re-create the ridiculous sublime will, in time, express the tragedy and anguish which can underlie this trite and ineffably dull comment on the weather.

Perhaps, again, another poet of unexploited genius will, diversely, write an ode in praise of the climatic conditions which lend themselves so unstintingly to the exigencies of the moment, and allow themselves to shield the terror of the speaker!

Sforza and Caro both knew how ridiculous his remark was, but it helped to smooth over the awkwardness of the moment, and Caro answered it with equal banality.

Conversation languished. To himself Sforza was thinking, "I never knew she was so beautiful," and

that admiration of the loveliness of the beloved which gives a feeling of physical faintness swept over him: there was the loveliness before him, near him, utterly unattainable.

He said with sudden driven harshness:

"I hear you are leaving for the desert. Do you think it wise?"

The romance of the meeting was swept from Caro, she rallied her mood of defence; that unreasoning impatience which comes from the fear of being hindered in the execution of something we mean to do, *malgré tout,* rose in her; she said, her eyes a little veiled:

"Quite."

"There is a good deal of disaffection," Sforza ventured.

Caro gave a little laugh.

"Yes, everywhere, isn't there? Why, however, should it choose to become extra important just where I am going?"

Sforza opened his hands in negation.

"I do not know. But I am sure, my brother told me, that we are in for a rather serious trouble here."

"*Tant pis* for you. I will, then, escape!" Caro laughed.

"You are going quite alone with your maid?" Sforza asked; he had to ask that.

"Oh, yes."

She offered no information, he could not press for it, he looked at her, and his eyes kindled, there was the other method of dissuasion, he would try it; he had been about to plead, to implore if necessary, when Hamid el Alim entered the lounge; he crossed at once to Caro, his smiling glance passed over Sforza, ignored him.

"I have your tickets, and have engaged your dragoman. You must leave to-night by the night express."

Sforza had been staring at him, his own face had

paled until it was ashen; he said to Caro, turning his back very deliberately on Hamid:

"Madame, *je vous fais mon adieu.*"

He halted for a moment in the big doorway, his slight, tall figure outlined against the dazzling sunshine. He had an indescribable air of race which lay perhaps in the carriage of his head, a certain ease of movement, but which made him a distinct personality amongst men of far greater claim to appearance.

He stepped down; the dazzling, sunlit crowd swallowed him up.

As he disappeared Caro felt as if, for her, the light had gone out of the day. Because she felt so, an added warmth slid into her voice as she talked with Hamid. He came to see her off, armed with magazines and flowers, and special reed-covered cushions which smelt delightful, and had sleep-giving properties.

He kissed Caro's hand when he said good-bye. The station was a blur of brilliant light and darkness.

"*Au revoir à bientôt,*" Hamid murmured; in the obscurity his eyes seemed to blaze. He said something else, and Caro's face turned to him, startled, inquiring.

"I was only wishing you a happy journey in Arabic," Hamid said, laughing at her. He put a foot, gleaming in its conventional patent shoe, into the carriage to steady himself, and Fleet, from Saria's arms, growled menacingly. Fleet did not like any native people, "gentlemen" or otherwise. Hamid frowned a little, lifted a decisive finger for a second. Fleet snapped, his small white teeth met on it; Saria had pulled him away instantly; the whole incident was trivial, but Hamid's grasp on his small fur neck was painful reality, and Fleet twisted with a fierce little-dog yell of pain, his eyes rolled upwards: he might be suffering and afraid, but he was defiant and enraged as well.

"I've got him, sir," Saria said. She put calm

restraining hands over Hamid's one, and forced Fleet free. He snuggled down against her, whimpering, whilst Hamid's eyes still flickered, and Caro felt acutely distressed. She hated the incident, it had spoilt the pleasure of the journey; it had clouded her mind. Hamid should have freed his finger and laughed—he was so big, and Fleet so very small!

Hamid said good-bye again; the train moved, the station slid away.

Saria had released Fleet, he wriggled forward, his apprehensive yet hopeful amber eyes fixed on his mistress, his tuft of tail quivered, it dared not wag.

Caro did not notice him, she was staring through the window. Fleet was quite close, and laid an ice-cold nose against her hand. She started. Fleet sat perfectly still, his head turned deliberately away as if to say: "Whatever there is to be said—even done—get on with it, please, I would be so grateful to have it over."

No notice was taken of him, and Saria at last called gently: "Fleet!"

He crept back and climbed into Saria's lap, and Saria's kindly human hand stroked his bruised neck: the consciousness grew in Fleet that his was not the only dislike to coloured people, others, however, did not snap at them, that was the difference.

* * * * *

From the station Hamid el Alim drove to his father's house. He went as usual to his own rooms; as he entered his father rose from a divan and greeted him. Hamid's face flushed darkly, this greeting, the reason which underlay the unexpectedness of his father's presence, had the force of a blow in this moment. He moistened his lips as he received his father's blessing and listened to a brief exhortation with veiled eyes.

After Hassenein el Alim had left him he stood long before the window, until Asra, his servant,

touched his arm gently and made a gesture to the robes laid out upon the cushions. Hamid picked up a waist-cloth; he stood holding it in his hands, staring at it, his beautiful face distorted by an almost malignant grin. Under his breath, in English, he said: "My wedding garments!" his brilliant, mocking eyes resting on the gorgeous embroideries, the rope of pearls.

"My lord should hasten," Asra ventured. From an inner room a burst of giggling and cries cut the quietude sharply. In his mind Hamid saw Fari being attended by the women of the harîm for the marriage ceremony.

The whole place reeked of heavy perfumes, of rich cooking; it hummed to new activity, to that spurious happiness which is in part hysteria.

Fari alone was tranquil, and hers was the tranquillity which comes after terrible suspense, the tranquillity of achieved success. She was to marry Hamid after all, he was to be hers, she his. To-night every Eastern characteristic in her was intensified a thousandfold by its Western influence; she enjoyed the appreciation of her hopes and sensations, she extracted from each smallest detail its quota of satisfaction.

The tittering women surrounding her, their gestures and comments, she scarcely noticed, her mood needed no stimulus.

Her father had enlightened her generously; she knew the political situation as well as Hamid himself.

"Gradually, gradually," Raboun had told her, "spread out first a little idea for him, but let it be an idea which arrests his attention, then, my daughter, little by little, but by infinitesimally little, you understand, you will parade your other thoughts, but carefully always. In the end you will obtain influence, and he will never dream you have it! Women can achieve anything if they are content to

appear to become anything their husbands wish. Remember that, my daughter."

"My father, I will remember," Fari had answered, meek eyes cast down.

Whilst Asra robed him, Hamid, too, was speculating; his mind had swung clear of retrospection, always a foreign element in him, and had reverted to that far more welcome one, his own interests. He was extremely relieved that Caro had left the city, the thought the news of his marriage might be conveyed to her was extremely distasteful to him, and he felt spiritually freer; he could not have given the mental relaxation he was experiencing a name, but in effect he felt a spiritual freedom.

He had been amazed lately at his own restraint where Caro was concerned; metaphorically, he had drawn back and admired this marvellous quality in himself—the power of self-control it evidenced; now, indulging this pleasant mood further, he let his mind dwell on the luck which was assuredly his in these days: all went his way. The Cairene rising was assured success as far as it was humanly possible for such success to be assured; his desert plan had already succeeded almost beyond his fondest expectation, and his participation was now merely a question of time, his duties to the cause would be a sufficient reason for his absence.

He was not stirred by the thought of his marriage, it was a necessary event, that was all; Fari was *fade* now for him, of insipid charm; his whole mind was focused on Caro, on that maddening charm Englishwomen had for him—a charm which robbed him of reason, and had (as Zachilinos could testify!) robbed him of many other things as well!

The Ambassadors had been bidden to a feast arranged in honour of his wedding, Hamid had himself directed the invitations to be delivered that night. . . . He detached his thoughts from his cultivated life as a diviner entered the room. Like all

Orientals, Hamid was profoundly superstitious; he sat cross-legged, watching with intentness the diviner's machinations.

The man was old, wrinkled, and, like most of his calling, not quite sane.

He delved with shaking fingers in the thin layers of sand and mumbled to himself.

"Speak louder," Hamid ordered sharply. Behind him his Arab servant's unwavering, melancholy eyes studied the sand.

The diviner began to froth at the mouth. He was epileptic.

"Take him away," Hamid cried furiously. He rose and kicked the writhing form; he was afraid and angry, and in that moment tremblingly apprehensive; it was a very bad omen the diviner should have said nothing, have been stricken whilst he was divining Hamid's future.

In a back courtyard the man, who, out of sight had been tended with care as became one of his calling, who could attract the evil eye to any of lesser power, waited to be alone; then with a glance of terror, ran like one hunted from the place.

Hamid, in his room, gorgeous now and habited like a prince of fairy lore, wandered up and down trying to regain ease of mind. His Western cynicism gibed at his Eastern fear, mocked him with his childishness. But he could not shake off the depression of dread.

He went and stared at himself in the huge mirror, generally an occupation which solaced him. To-night, in his wonderful scarlet and snow-white robes, his jewels and turban of Mecca, he looked to himself like some marionette dressed for a part in an Arabian tale. Odd, silly, yet disturbing memories of England, Paris, Bucharest, his life at Oxford, crowded his brain; then, all things of the past and immediate present grew valueless suddenly as he thought, with sheer suffocating passion, of Caro. His own face, the

eyes half closed, stared back at him with immobility: which was truly himself, this man who had been so steeped in glittering civilization, or the other man whose nature was a desert nature, ruthless, overpowering, incalculable?

He crossed to the window again—a train whistled out of the dark distance.

Where was Caro now—how far on her way—the way to solitude, a solitude he would shatter, then remould? He flung the window open, and the gaiety and stir of the city seemed to pour in. . . . Further and further Caro was speeding from him, but at his behest. His mouth had lines of cruel enjoyment round it as he thought of that, then sharply he turned his head; from within there came the sound of music, he inclined his body a little backwards to listen better, then with a quick movement he pulled the window to, and stood waiting, letting excitement guide his mood, forcing his memories of Caro upon his expectation.

CHAPTER XVIII

"Memory is a little wind, and magical
The dreaming hours . . .
As a breath, a sigh
Fall the petals of the hours. . . ."

—THOMAS MOULT.

"THERE ought to be something perfectly divine at the end of this journey to atone for it," Caro told herself, as the train rocked and banged through the night.

There was.

She fell asleep at last to wake in a perfect dawn which semed to hold a golden world in its embrace, a world of softly gleaming tints, almost unbelievable loveliness. Caro drew in her breath with that quick pang which sheer beauty can awake, then sat up on her plank-like bed and looked with transfigured face into the mystic eyes of dawn.

This was the desert then—this sheet of tinted, palest gold, beneath an opalescent sky.

She flung a window wide, and a wind which might have come from the antarctic struck her, and made her laugh and shiver at once: it stung, but it exhilarated.

Of course, the glory of the dawn faded, and Caro's exultation. Noon found her irritable, sandy, and resultantly depressed. But respite was at hand, and it was not quite sunset hour when the inimitable Hassan pointed out the Villa Zohra.

"There she lie, my ladies!"

Caro felt her spirit sing in that moment: the villa looked so peaceful, its palely lemon walls so cool, and its garden, its orange groves almost incredible.

Within there was a bathroom and a bed in Caro's bedroom which was, she knew by instinct, of French make! She felt as excited as a little girl as she explored, followed by Saria and Fleet.

The rooms were all white-walled, the walls veiled with strips of tapestry, thin silken rugs, the floors were of parquet, there were hanging lamps, a profusion of cushions, divans, one or two cheaply cretonned basket chairs, no pictures, but—a rather remarkable thing, it seemed somehow to Caro—a collection of weapons in every room, many beautiful, and valuably inlaid. The signs of the French wife were conspicuously absent, every servant was a Nubian, the villa eminently Oriental, rather bare indeed, and yet possessing an odd charm, the colouring of the stuffs and rugs was beautiful, and the linen exquisite.

Caro tried to think what manner of man had planned this place and set it amidst the eternal perfume of roses, for rose scent impregnated the place, very faint, always fresh, divinely sweet; when the wind blew from the north rose petals drifted on the Nile, half a mile away.

Excellent servants waited at an excellent dinner. Saria and Fleet dined together in a little room off the dining-room: Caro, drinking her coffee in the garden, could hear them conversing. She realized with a little smile that Saria and she were the only white people for miles probably. Yet she did not feel lonely. She could not have said what she actually did feel. If she had tried to describe her state of mind she would have said it was momentarily content. Events seemed distant, affections slept: it was as if this space, this vast quietude, brought infinite relief to the spirit. For a little while! Until that restlessness which had run beneath the contentment, a secret stream, rose engulfingly as the darkness deepened.

A dahabeeyah passed on the Nile, hung with

lamps which looked like huge gold and scarlet roses in the night. From its decks there came the creak of movement, then the song of the men.

And instantly Caro's tranquillity was swept from her, and in its place insurgent memory reigned.

Her loneliness became not restful, but a goad, its power heightened by that note of gaiety and youth, of mingling life, struck by the passing dahabeeyah. Caro's thoughts flew like homing birds to Sforza.

Where was he? Still in Cairo? Why had he ever gone to Cairo? Her spur of hope was broken by the memory of his brother's possible need of him; he had gone, of course, to meet Robert.

Her thoughts trailed now like slowly winging birds across her mind. Sforza would have loved the rose garden, she was quite sure of that. Instinctively she felt sure too she knew his likes and dislikes—was that love? She supposed it must be, and followed that vague belief.

It led her to the reminder she had not known John's likes and dislikes, and that certain tastes of his, certain outlooks, had awakened her contempt, and she had secretly despised him for having had such tastes, such views. . . . Standing amongst the roses she realized that in real love there could be no contempt, there might be anger—that was a personal, free quality; it could exist beside courage, even beside understanding, but no lower quality could do that. Where *was* Sforza? Her thoughts sought and sought him, striving ineffectively to vision his doings, his probable interests.

How little she knew of him really, and how much!

Each line of his dark, strong face, the way he brushed his hair, his very few pieces of jewellery, his habit of smoothing his hair when he was absorbed, the shape of his fine hands. She recalled her first impression of him as a survival of the mediæval period. It was very possible to imagine him in the magnificence of the dress of the Renaissance, stak-

ing his life on a gay hazard, throwing a dice for the lives of his enemies; yet he suggested great sureness of purpose, and great concentration.

"Why did I never know—in those early months?" Caro asked herself despairingly. She remembered now, as one does remember when one loves, Sforza's description of his home, the beauty his words had conveyed of its rather bare rooms, its dignity. It had been built in the fourteenth century, and had ceilings of chestnut wood, carven walls of it, or ceilings painted in every lovely colour, representing a heaven where pink and golden angels, impossibly clad, floated in perpetuity, smiling inanely. Caro remembered Sforza and she had laughed over them . . . she recalled he had said there was an oubliette in the palazzo too, and a ballroom with a floor which the feet of centuries had polished till it shone like glass.

There had been little modernity about the place. "I love it to stay as it was," Sforza had said decidedly. "If I ever have to sell my beautiful things it will be in order to preserve age, not to stimulate modernity!"

That had been an afternoon of varied light and shade, when Rita had been too tired to go out, and Sforza and she had driven over to see the château he had inherited, which, too, had been a delightful old place. One room had been almost too dark to see. In another, lined with mirrors, the river had glittered so that the whole place had seemed a pool of shimmering silver. Finally, in a little room hung with faded green and rose tapestry, they had had tea, prepared by an old man-servant whom, so Sforza had told Caro, he dared not pension off lest he should break his heart.

From the Nile there came the sound of laughter, music again, life seemed to call to Caro beneath this sapphire sky across the banks of roses. She felt unutterably lonely.

With a little shiver she turned and went into the villa, back to her lofty white bedroom with its faded orange hangings, its grey and silver praying rugs, its greater loneliness, perhaps.

As Saria undressed her, brushed her hair whilst she sat before the oval mirror, Caro was reminded irresistibly of another evening, that last evening in London when she had sat so before an oval mirror and her own disenchanted eyes had gazed back at her.

How far she had travelled since that springtime evening, and yet, in one sense, what a little way!

She was still alone. The first evening, she remembered, she had longed for loneliness. It had seemed that loneliness must give back to her life that dignity disillusion had torn from it. To-night in her forlornness she had no thought of dignity, she only longed for someone to come in and tell her she was loved, talk with her, laugh with her.

When Saria had gone she could not rest. She left one lamp burning and walked about her room.

A wind had risen, that little night wind which in England sounds like winter, even in the summer time, a little, half-muffled wind, ghost-like and plaintive, and even though it blew the perfume from the heart of the roses, it seemed to carry in its depths the thought too of their fading.

Caro wondered how Mir Jokim's French wife had ever lived her life through here: perhaps, she thought, hers had been a *grande passion?*

With a shrug of her shoulders at her own nervous wondering, the desire to think of anything save the surrounding desert, the creeping wind, she went into the big room to look for a book.

A shadowy form rose, it seemed to her startled mind, to a gigantic height, and she shrank back, her hands outspread against the walls, her eyes terrified.

Hassan, the dragoman, said softly:

"My lady, I frighten you. I am sorry. I watch

only. Here you are quite safe; there"—he flung out a long arm, his eyes gleaming goldenly in the reflection of the lamp—"there, there is only the desert and your own heart."

He moved backwards, bowing before her. "My lady will sit here in this room?"

Caro shook her head.

"No. I only wanted a book." She chose a French novel, hesitated, then, in order to forget the space, the sad, little night wind, said to Hassan: "Have you ever been here before, Hassan?"

The man's eyes flickered. He said slowly:

"Everyone knows the Villa Zohra, my lady. It is very beautiful villa, where the rich and lovely ladies and gentlemans go."

"Oh, then the man who owns it lets it?" Caro asked. She felt a little surprised somehow, vaguely disappointed. The idea of the place being let rather dispelled the romance she had been weaving about it in her own mind. "A French lady lived here, didn't she?" she said idly.

Again Hassan's eyes flickered. He answered evasively: "Yes, I think, perhaps, but I do not remember, my lady."

He made a little movement as if to go, but Caro was determined not to be left alone just then. She continued carelessly:

"Whose is the dahabeeyah tied up on the opposite bank, Hassan?"

Hassan opened his hands.

"But it is the dahabeeyah of the Persian, Mir Jokim, my lady. They make festival, I think."

"But I thought Mir Jokim, who owns the villa, had gone to Tiflis?"

"I dunno," Hassan replied doubtfully. "Perhaps yes. I go now, if my lady wishes."

He had gone before Caro could protest, and the sound of his soft, yet heavy footfall came to her.

She went back to her room, carrying Roche-

brune's book on the Orient. But, after all, she felt sleepy now, and she turned out the lamp and went to bed.

Her last waking thoughts were of the desert. She was here, in it, of it almost, a desert of roses, lit by vivid star-shine. It seemed extraordinary to think that London was still "going on" thousands of miles away, a London lit for the evening, where people walked with ceaseless noise upon stone pavements. Here, if she went beyond the garden, sand stretched down to the river, and beyond it, everlastingly. It made her feel at once narcotized and excited. It had an effect like a powerful drug.

CHAPTER XIX

. . . "Through all the thousands of the years
The same sweet rumour flows,
With dreaming skies and gleaming tears
And kisses and the rose."

—Alfred Noyes.

In the morning Hassan, bowing, announced he "had surprise."

Caro followed him to the courtyard at the back of the villa and Hassan, with a conjurer's wave of the hand, drew her attention to a half-open door; he called out loudly, and a Nubian appeared leading a camel, a really beautiful beast, bearing on its back a gorgeous palanquin.

"My lady like to ride," Hassan suggested airily. "Be'old!" he flung another gracious gesture in the camel's direction. "Myself I go donkey perhaps, perhaps camel too."

Caro regarded the surprise with appreciation tempered with doubt, and the camel returned her gaze with one of forlorn disdain.

"I have never ridden a camel, Hassan," she said.

"Always begin," Hassan stated with a cheerful smile, "very nice beast to ride, very nice ride, nice trip. We go see a tomb, I think, most agreeable."

Caro laughed, and went up to change into riding kit; this was an adventure anyway, and even if it were a little reminiscent of the Zoo, it was entertaining.

Hassan helped her to settle herself in the palanquin, he gave the order to the camel to rise; to Caro it seemed as if it were going to continue rising until it reached the sky, and with a shiver of apprehension

she wondered if she were about to suffer from the complaint Tim described as a "cross-channel nerve-storm"; she fervently hoped not.

Hassan bestrode another camel, swaying to its every movement easily, Caro noted, a practice she copied at once, finding much comfort thereby.

It was a crystal morning, hot, yet with a cool wind, and as the camel padded on and on, Caro began to feel as if she moved within a dream, the warmth, the goldenness, the *sameness* mesmerized her; she thought scarcely at all, her mind drowsed like her nerves; Hassan was singing to himself, a whisper of a song; sometimes far ahead a little eddy of dust whirled in a spiral, then settled; extraordinarily high overhead, so high they were but infinitesimal blurs against the infinite blueness, birds wheeled, and when one flew lower, the music of its call dropped sheer from sky to earth, an arrow of tiny sound.

The temple was a half-ruin, deserted, unwatched even by a native guardian; against the gleaming light one tower stood outlined, a scarlet and green lizard was curled at its base, it slid like a tongue of coloured fire against the grey stone, and vanished, and after the hardly heard rustle of its flight the white and golden peace which lay over everything gathered the temple once more into its folds.

"Worship here, I think," Hassan said dreamily. "Once—long time ago——"

He did not try to talk; he stood, his hand on the camel's gorgeous bridle rein, gazing into the distance; he was so little present personally, his personality was so obliterated by the spell of the desert that he might not have been near, Caro might have been alone with her thoughts which clung about the deserted temple, peopling it with worshippers, rearing its dead splendours high again, sweeping it fair and beautiful, restoring to it the power and secrecy which

had been its right in those centuries of which, now, even the dust had perished. She looked and looked at the massive broken pillar, raised by man in preparation for the reception of man's weariness, and hope, and love; about her the desert flowed, a tideless sea, holding in its unfathomable depths all the mystery of life and death.

The lizard had slid forth again, and jewelled the base of the pillar.

Without speaking, as if words might soil the perfection of silence, Caro walked into the temple, and was at once shut from the light, enclosed in a vast coldness, and suddenly, yet distinguishably, she heard an echo of the night wind, like the cry of a soul seeking refuge and finding none.

She went back to the sunlight, to the palely golden peace.

The garden seemed home-like when she re-entered it, two gardeners were attending to the roses, a boy piped gaily beside the watering pots, from the villa itself came the stir of life, and of something more prosaic, lunch!

Saria and Fleet appeared together, Saria calm and aproned, Fleet worrying along, his paws beating sand into his own face, and the sand fleas practising gymnastics on his enraged back; he was sick to death of Africa and wanted to go home, where fleas were an occasion and not a habit, and where sand was where it was, so to speak, "put," on a seashore, a place to which Sealyhams went seldom, and which, anyhow, was bounded by a good, hard, decent pavement somewhere, on whose rigid stretch a dog's pads ceased from troubling, and his temper was at rest.

Caro burst out laughing at his aggrieved eyes, she picked him up, thereby ruining a white linen coat, and talked to him in his own language, Fleet responded eagerly, he had a dog's beautifully forgiving nature which is so near divinity in that it forgives

always the wrongs it does not understand, and cherishes no malice.

"Saria," Caro said, "I think I shall adore this place!"

Hassan nodded enthusiastically; he was very pleased. Saria said slowly: "I hope so, ma'am," she had had experience of Caro's moods, which had been generally of the extreme order lately, either a sweeping satisfaction or undiluted depression; but she thought her mistress looked better, despite her description of "heathenish" as applied to her night's rest.

The mood of happiness lasted till the evening-time, and then, in that scented, half-light which seems so often to disturb the heart instead of soothing it:

"I wish something sweet would happen," Caro told herself wistfully, listening to the laughter and music again in the dahabeeyah, the perfume of roses like a sigh of longing all about her, "I wish someone would come, quite unexpectedly, and we'd have dinner, and be ever so gay, and then walk out here in the garden and talk."

Her thoughts slid back to Paris, to the evening on the terrace at Sforza's château with the worn and broken marble steps leading down either side into the garden, and the tangle of honeysuckle and climbing geraniums twisting in and out the stone balustrade like gold, and pink, and mauve ribbons; the fireflies had danced each night whilst they had all lounged and talked in the long chairs, Sforza with his dog at his feet, Tim with Fleet, the men white and black figures, Rita and herself less rigid lines of colour. They had talked of anything, speaking sometimes an absurd mixture of French and English and Italian, drinking coffee, and the innocuous "cordial médoc" which Rita liked "because it had a pretty colour." "Why?" Caro asked herself. "Why, under Heaven, did I not guess then that I loved Sforza! It was not morality, the knowledge I was not free, which kept

me back from loving him, I do not believe most people think of those things until they become a definite obstacle, a bar to their love—why was it then?"

Now she seemed able to remember so many little things in connexion with Sforza, his temper with the hooligan, a temper which Caro remembered had reminded her of molten steel, something as terrible, as powerful as that—and then a picnic they had all gone to see a famous château, whose owner, a friend of Sforza's, had been absent, a fact they had deplored chiefly because they had wanted tea so badly! They had all gone to the little inn finally and had coffee, and honey on a sort of black bread, served beneath vines on which the grapes hung so low you touched them by lifting your head—Tim had looked like a very innocent Bacchus, grapes above his head, round his laughing face.

"You do it like this," he had said, consuming silver-green grapes at an alarming rate, "and then," he had made a little bow to Sforza, "true Italian fashion, patrician, plebeian, like *this!*"

If it was a primitive method of disposing of grape skins, it was at least deft!

"True Italian!" he had repeated modestly. Sforza had imitated the ways of his own peasant people then, his dark face alight, his eyes laughing all the while.

Then she and he had driven back together, and Caro had thought what attractive hands he had, strong, slender hands which looked hard, and gripped the wheel closely.

He had had on a dark blazer that day, and flannels, a white muffler about his throat and a white hat pulled over his eyes to shield them from the radiance of the sunset, which had been pouring into his face. He had drawn out his battered cigarette-case with a free hand and miraculously lighted a match in its shelter with another slight movement.

Then his eyes had laughed out from beneath the

shadow of the hat-brim, and he had said, like Tim imitating him:

"True Italian way!"

Another day, they had gone to a small place to see a famous old church, and whilst the others "did" the place on Tim's behalf, with the thoroughness youth demands, Caro had fallen asleep in one of the oaken stalls; she remembered gazing at the window before her, and gazing next into Sforza's eyes, bent above her: she had been awakened by his glance, she had "felt" it in her sleep, and for a moment they had gazed so at one another, intent, absorbed, then Caro had laughed and risen, and had nearly fallen because, in spite of most of her having awakened, her foot had not! Sforza had put an arm round her, and there had come with his close proximity the faint, very clean fragrance of verbena, of a certain brand of cigarette he always smoked.

"If I had known I would love him, what difference could it have made?" Caro asked herself.

Perhaps none; though it seems so impossible when one really loves, that love should not answer again.

Caro felt an extraordinary sense of amazement about herself, that this thing should happen to her, and she have no power to check it.

Always, before, she had thought it rather humiliating for a woman to love a man who did not care for her, who had not encouraged her; she had listened to other women talking of such love and had felt a faint contempt.

Now she felt a flood of sympathy.

The sunset deepened, died, the pink roses grew pale, the scarlet ones looked black.

"Another night!" Caro thought with a little sigh. She wandered to the back of the villa and out on to the desert, the smoke from a fire stung her eyes, the sharp smell of food cooking in the open came to her;

she made out a group of Arabs squatting on the ground, talking and smoking and laughing; one detached himself and sprang up and came towards her. It was, of course, Hassan.

"Nubian peoples come from passing caravan," he explained with one of his beloved gestures towards the fire and its attendant group. "Dancin' in village to-night, now caravan has come, my lady like to go?"

"I think I would," Caro said doubtfully.

"Very good—very nice," Hassan replied. "I fetch my lady later."

He went back to the "Nubian peoples," and Caro stood for a little while gazing at the scene. One extraordinary and depressing thing seemed to be that whether you were in Africa or Europe, or, she decided, any other Continent, it could give you little if you did not bring a happy heart to it.

This was Africa, she was here in the desert she had heard of, read of, dreamt of, since her childhood, here were the people she had heard so much about, the Arabs, who were ferocious, sentimental, cunning and heroic at once, beings of spectacular splendour!

Before her the actual natives sat, as unimpressive as she was unimpressed. . . . The sheerest romance of pilgrimage, a great caravan was not far off, she was to see it soon, and the native dances English people talked in whispers about, and laughed over, and went to see again!

She had been through the little village, which was near, and had been disappointed; all the villages near the railway had looked much the same, but she had seen no desert village by night, and the idea seemed good because she felt so lonely.

She dined a little earlier than usual and Hassan himself appeared with the savoury and waited with that ostentatious patience which is hurrying. Caro rose quickly, and as he led her out into the rough path, he expatiated on the charms of the dancers they were to see.

"Dancing in Cairo lately," he added, a note in his voice expressing the opinion praise could be no greater.

The dancing-place was a café, and Hassan thrust a group of Arabs unceremoniously aside and placed a chair for Caro.

The air was hot, over-scented and charged with excitement.

Caro felt a flat disappointment, a chill dislike; the dancers, lounging at a table, were, for her, utterly without beauty and stamped with an ornate sensuality which, to a Western mind, influenced more by suggestion than actuality, was grotesque, almost comic.

She rose suddenly.

"I do not wish to stay," she said to Hassan, who stared at her with infuriated reproach. His voice rose harshly, he gesticulated with abandon, the other Arabs looked on with a sort of implacable amusement.

Caro moved towards the entrance, Hassan followed, expostulating still.

"You can return," Caro said to him indifferently, but he continued to speak, to voice his injury, until Caro, turning to him, said in a very low voice, but quite firmly, "Please be quiet, Hassan."

The village was crowded to-night, fires flashed here and there, coloured lamps hung above certain doors, the crowd jostled and laughed its way along.

Caro walked quickly, Hassan strode beside her, his Bedouin tread expressing his Bedouin disapproval, at the villa gate, where Saria and Fleet waited, he bowed and departed.

"Didn't you like the dancing, ma'am?" Saria inquired. She had seen a very little, and heard a great deal in Cairo from other maids concerning the Arab dances, which in her own mind she considered "low," and now her mistress's return awoke in her that acute

satisfaction of one who has not said, "I told you so," but could have done so!

"It was too hot," Caro said.

"Close little places these cafés in Africa," Saria commented, "all those cloaks and the men's dresses make them seem smaller, or less room to move about in, I mean."

She paused, then added:

"There was an Arab gentleman rode past a little while ago, ma'am, on the most beautiful horse, and he was dressed in a white cloak and a big white thing bound round his head, and he rode simply finely; the horse was fresh, and it was trying to run away, and the Arab was speaking to it, laughing at it a little, but I had the shock of a lifetime when I saw his face, he was so like the Marchese Sforza, you'd have said the very image, only darker."

"It must have been Mr. Essex, the Marchese's brother," Caro said. "I wish I had seen him."

"This Arab was like the Marchese'd be if he was an Arab—just like that, ma'am," Saria stated.

Caro lingered in the garden, perhaps the unknown rider would go past again?

She waited a long time in the coolness, listening to the vague sounds, now low, now louder, from the village. No one came.

CHAPTER XX

" Crimson nor yellow roses
Nor the savour of the mounting sea,
Are worth the perfume I adore
That clings to thee. . . .
The languid-headed lilies tire,
The ceaseless waters weary me.
I ache with passionate desire
Of thine and thee."

FROM a tumult of impressions Hamid's mind retained one certainty, he must escape, he must go to the desert, see Caro; the thought of her, his impression of her, had become a torment.

He told himself that events, no less than his own longing, urged his going, the unrest in Cairo had become widespread, the instigators of the rebellion were discovering it was easier to foment discontent, inculcate lawlessness, than control it. The mob was getting out of hand; already the Government had ordered curfew as a preliminary to martial law, Hamid knew.

He realized that the result of his plotting, his father's lifelong labours, had already in its violence swung the pendulum far beyond his secret reach, now, if he would direct its force, he must come forward and proclaim his power and right to do so.

And for that he was not ready; his ambition at least was ready, his vanity yearned for this *dénouement,* this visible sign of his greatness, but his desire for Caro, a passion which swept his other passions before it, as leaves before a tempest, had conquered him completely. The thought of her had become an obsession with him, he saw her with the vision of his mind continuously, the almond-white beauty of her

skin, the mystery and laughter of her curiously green eyes, eyes which in moments seemed to promise that delirious surrender to love which can give a lover a heaven of fulfilment few can grasp, fewer obtain.

Only women of very distinct and fascinating personality have such eyes, which, perfectly innocent as they are, are yet provocative through their innocence, and seem to hold in their depths the intoxicating awareness of a nature which can love, an awareness which, through their glance, communicates its enchanting knowledge to others.

Hamid knew Caro to possess the peculiarly crystal innocence some women seem able to keep throughout life, women whose lives have been very sheltered perhaps, women whom men have loved dearly as well as passionately. And her youth was a delight, her youth which was allied to such *savoir faire*, flavoured with the bitter essence of disillusion which, for a newcomer, became a bitter-sweet flavour, stimulating, adding interest.

"She is a madness in my veins," Hamid confessed to himself; he was driven by his longing to look at her again, and when he thought of her in the desert set in roses, his mind felt as if it whirled in radiant fever.

He must go, he would go, and if the rebellion found him in the desert—he shrugged broad shoulders, the fatalism which was his heritage asserted itself: what would be, would be.

Besides, he had sufficient faith in his own power, his influence, to believe he could assert himself as he chose . . . if he were resisted—he smiled to himself, his mind reached far out into the future and drew for him visions which in their lure equalled the lure of his ambition.

If the desert were to be his kingdom for a time—it would be a wondrous kingdom . . . the veneer of his modernity, his western training fell from him like a veil as he saw, between half-closed lids, this

promised land of dreams, this future life of war, of love, and licence, free from obligations, responsibility, the deadening effect of modern codes, a life of the hunted, and the hunting, the life of his ancestors, the life his father had once led of splendour and unbridled lawlessness . . . with Caro . . .

He drew in his breath sharply, and started violently as Raboun Bey's suave voice said close to him:

"Dreaming?"

The blue fire of Hamid's eyes met the chill shine of Raboun Bey's almost menacingly, the elder man saw his anger, and his faint smile deepened.

"Ah, young love!" he murmured, his beard between two fingers, he peered up with sudden query to Hamid: "Where is Fari?"

"Within," Hamid said curtly. His father-in-law's appearance had brought back upon him the burden of his new position, as well as the reminder of his old responsibilities.

He did not curse his marriage, it had been a necessity, for one thing, and, for another, he was fond of Fari, but he cursed the Bey's knowledge and his power of access to knowledge.

Still, he had married Fari, gratified Raboun's ambition, and, in any case, if the old fool wished to carp, let him, he could effect nothing!

Through the veil of smoke which rose from his pipe he studied Raboun's heavy face. A hot resentment of anger flared up in him. Who was this inert mound of flesh to stem his life—attempt to do so?

What did he know of the surging tide of romance, the heady thoughts which thronged him, the call to his whole nature of the desert?

He listened perfunctorily to Raboun's droning sentences, each of weight, each connected with the inevitable rising; occasionally he answered, "Yes," or "No"; Raboun finished speaking and smoked on

placidly, his intent glance on Hamid's sullen, beautiful face.

And he thought of the passion of his own youth when he had believed in reincarnation, and had told his heart's adoration—and been laughed at for his smallness, his poverty, the shape of his nose!

Without envy he considered Hamid: it was inconceivable a woman would laugh at him, she might attempt to kill him, she might humiliate him, but she would never laugh at him.

Raboun's information had been very detailed, his sad lucidity of thought was a result.

Que faire?

He shrugged heavy shoulders beneath his shabby coat. What could one ever do with another's life? It might be possible to retard its activities, but if the desire which impelled them was a powerful one you could not arrest them. He had no real hope of stopping Hamid's insane desert expedition. His own spies had told him of Caro's presence at the Villa Zohra; he was wearily aware that Hamid must be planning to leave any day, the earlier the better.

His absence might mean the débâcle of their insurrection, even so, in that contingency, Raboun did not propose to make the mistake of speaking openly to Hamid. His intuition had told him how hopeless that would be.

By silence he might still retain a certain foothold in the demesne of Hamid's friendship.

He rose and walked with heavy tread, and looked out over the city. Bands of irresponsibles paraded the streets shouting and singing; the Western-bound boats had been besieged now for days; the Suez guard had been greatly reinforced; once already the soldiers had ridden on the mob. . . .

Standing there, gazing forth, studying probabilities, the futility of it swept over Raboun like an ice-cold wave. The earth still gasped from the shock of the most stupendous war history had ever known, her

wounds were still unstaunched, and humanity's treatment of those terrible wounds consisted of rubbing into them the salt of its petty anger, of forcing to renewed and anguished effort a system drained of strength and steadfastness.

With brutal cynicism Raboun thought:

"It is easier to rob the weak!"

For himself his personal gain had, as is so often the case, stilled his universal demand; he decided now that he was weary of struggle. He left Hamid after the usual flowery farewell.

Hamid, watching him go, knew that he knew, and accepted his acceptance, with a sense of bullying satisfaction.

Yet Raboun's gentleness, whether it had sprung from cowardice or consideration, had influenced him insensibly; his mind was entirely divorced from Fari or her devotion, but he spent the last evening of his stay in Cairo with her, and was to her all things she wished him to be.

They sat upon the housetop, which was roofed by a gorgeous silk awning, and furnished with deep rugs and long divers-coloured cushions.

Hamid, in native loose white linen clothes, a short embroidered jacket over his muslin shirt, and the folds of his turban loose about his throat, half lay, half leant upon a pile of cushions, Fari in his arms, her small dark head pillowed on his shoulder.

She lay against him very lightly; there was not very much of her, she was slight and small-boned, even her gorgeous native draperies could not make her seem anything but slender.

But if her body was frail her passion for Hamid was not, and with that curious deepening power a great love possesses, it had developed in her all the Orientalism which was her heritage. Perhaps it was but the naturalness which the intimacy of love must perforce reveal, perhaps Fari, too, believed in these golden hours, in reincarnation, perhaps, as she had

whispered to Hamid in the night, she had been indeed his slave, to be trampled beneath his feet if he so chose.

She delighted to talk to him in Arabic (she who had once loved French so, other languages had seemed "*barbare!*"), she called him the names native women call their husbands, she became for him the Eastern wife of the harîm, she felt herself that, was content to be so.

What neither of them realized was that when this adorable stupor of first possession, first passion passed, her mentality would awake again.

To-night all of Fari slept, save her love, and she wound close, slender arms about Hamid's neck, and asked him again and again: "Dost thou love me, Lord of my Life?"

And Hamid, his mind and soul utterly distant, swore mechanically that he did.

Fari moved her silken head until her lips rested against his throat.

"My lord, if thou wast to love another I would pray for death."

She raised herself to lay stress on her words, and her eyes blazed like black pools with little stars of gold in them; that they were ringed with kohl and her lips carmined, and her face over-powdered only added to her bizarre charm somehow.

"Dost thou hear?"

She was trembling with nervousness. Hamid raised his head and gathered her close and soothed her like a child.

When she slept at last he carried her to her bed, and without a backward glance, went out, down to his own apartments, where he caught up a big cloak, and, noiselessly on his heel-less shoes, passed out into the night. He travelled by train for some distance, and as he alighted his servant came forward.

"Is all prepared?" Hamid asked him, and in answer to his servant's low obeisance, strode past him.

He rode on horseback towards the west, his servant following. It was noon when at last he halted at the little village where his caravan awaited him.

He stood in the strong sunlight looking it over, his eyes narrowed to brilliant slits of blue, his white teeth showing as he spoke.

And here he became a commander, a leader at once, he had young lieutenants, a fellow sheik was travelling southwards too. Hamid and the Sheik Ismäel Said rode forth together, Said's superb burnous of almost glittering scarlet floating behind him like a flame.

Both men were naturally splendid horsemen, part of their beasts. Ismäel Said was a typical Saharan prince, burnt, steel-like, still half-barbaric. He kept on glancing at Hamid el Alim, who, to many of the Arabs, especially a man like Ismäel Said, was partly a myth—an Egyptian who was English too, who bargained in cities and reigned in the desert. . . .

Ismäel Said began to speak of the desert wars. His eyes shone, he laughed in his throat with delight. The English, to him, were less enemies than other people whom it was legitimate to fight, and he adored fighting. It was his natural sport.

He said, turning in his saddle:

"There is the man Essex; none catch him; lately my men fought with his!" He made a noise with his lips expressive of amusement and contempt mingled. "They fought well, the paid devils!"

"Who has he?" Hamid asked, his attention arrested.

"Wanderers from many tribes; men who have attached themselves to him for gain, for food." He turned to Hamid once more. "But he has courage, all bear witness to that."

As they rode, ever veering towards the south-west, farther and farther into the desert, Ismäel Said began to sing. He had a rough, yet musical voice, and

he sang a song of love and death and blood, beating his brown hands together as he sang. Curiously, the song had a lilt in it now and again which was reminiscent of the Eton boating song, and the likeness smote against Hamid's memory, unlocking the door of those days, so that the English words floated into his mind: "Jolly boating weather!" And Said sang to that music a song of sunlit lust of battle, of starlit lust of love! Hamid's mind was jerked backwards to Fari, then suddenly forward towards Caro.

Ismäel Said and he camped side by side that night, and Hamid bade Said eat with him in his tent, which was very big, very luxurious, a thing of magnificence as such things go—the tent indeed of a travelling prince.

Said and he, when the Bedouin servants had withdrawn, talked of the newest dancing girls, of the scandals and intrigues of the desert villages, greater and less, of the possible French interference, and again and again Said hummed the desert song, his white teeth gleaming with the pleasure of the words, his strong thick throat back-thrown as he sang.

Hamid walked about the tent, seeing it with new eyes, striving to see it with the eyes to which he longed to show it. It was but barely decorated tonight, when he finally pitched camp it would be made as habitable as a villa.

"Why are you in the desert, Hamid el Alim?" Ismäel Said asked him suddenly, smiling between drooped lids. He had an extremely good idea, but he rather enjoyed the little-boy pleasure of "baiting" Hamid the mighty.

"I make arrangements on behalf of the Cause," Hamid said briefly. He could not stay still. He envied Said's luxury of repose, every nerve at rest, every muscle relaxed.

He, too, had been travelling a night and a day, and must travel two days still, but he felt, instead of the pleasant, healthy weariness from hard riding,

an odd strung-upness, a definite, unescapable restlessness.

He had been too long away from the desert. It was a man's life. It gave man his pleasures with both hands, fully, exhilaratingly.

Suddenly Ismäel Said's power of repose, the effect of immense, undrained vitality he gave, became an acute irritation to Hamid.

On the impulse of the moment he went out and ordered his men to strike camp and prepare at once to travel farther. They gathered together and stared at him like worried children, his lips drew back from his teeth in a snarl of anger at the thought of frustration.

In one hour, before the dawn, the caravan had started again, and Hamid rode alone.

Ismäel Said watched the camels wind out of sight, listened to the last, last sound of the hoofs, of voices as they died into the night.

He prepared for sleep in his own tent, his dark face alight with an almost fierce amusement.

CHAPTER XXI

"*Les occasions nous font connaître aux autres et encore plus à nous-mêmes.*"—La Rochefoucauld.

"I am at peace. This *is* peace," Caro said to herself each day. And each night, when the river-wind blew across the roses, it was as if, too, it drove the peace from her heart. It was as though the desert gave, and took away, to show its power, perhaps: as though the sunlit hours dropped blessing with gentle hands, and the hours of the night with chill, mischievous touch destroyed it.

Often she went to the ruined temple alone, now that she loved the desert, and sometimes she explored the village with its windowless mud houses, its plethora of naked babies, snarling dogs, and incalculably curious natives.

By day the café was more sordid even than by night—wooden seats, a counter, a few bottles of absinthe.

Life at the villa had settled down with extreme ease. Saria gardened and waited and sewed, Caro read and played and rode in the desert, which was like riding into a palely tinted dream. Only the nights were lonely and depressing. The dahabeeyah on the opposite side of the river had left its moorings and slid away. There was no more laughter, no sound of hautboys nor the beating of tom-toms, only the faint whisper of touch as a rose petal fell to the earth when the wind swayed the flowers together.

Caro used to lie often in the parrot-striped hammock which was swung between the palms and was shaded by a thick dark gauze awning. She used to lie there through the long afternoons and think of

Sforza, and wonder if she were not like a schoolgirl, and not care if she were.

Later, when this time was over, she would return to actual life and be matter of fact—pick up the threads; now she took romance to her heart and lived for it.

For the desert had an effect upon her thoughts like sunshine on closed flowers, they opened, and they were all new thoughts, and quite free from self-consciousness, from cynicism, from bitterness, and all shot through with the gentle, almost naïve, humour of some Arabs.

The desert had been unimaginable, and therefore its influence was greatly enhanced.

Caro's days were lived like an Arab's to the cry of the muezzin. In them this reminder of their faith evoked religious response; in Caro it deepened the sense of mysticism this desert life suggested. And it was this deepening which gave courage to her romance.

Here, in the perfumed solitude, quite impossible things seemed natural, the conventions of life appeared ridiculous.

Out of a sunset which was infinitely exquisite, into this mood of Caro's, Hamid el Alim rode, a fitting figure, a type of age-old romance himself in his deeply blue mantle, his white under-robe, with its beautiful waist-cloth, and his jewelled turban.

He rode up to the gate and sat there smiling a greeting, then he called in English:

"You do not know me!"

He alighted and walked towards her. Caro stood waiting for him, very real admiration in her eyes.

"But how splendid you look," she said frankly, smiling at him. And she added: "You fit into the picture wonderfully."

He smiled down at her.

"You see, it is my own background; perhaps that is why."

They walked slowly towards the hammock, beside which chairs had been placed.

Hamid held out the hammock.

"Do go back."

Caro rested in it again, and he sat native fashion on a pile of cushions.

"I may smoke?"

"Please."

He took his cigarette case from a roll in his waist-cloth, the same very thin French case with the diamond monogram, and Caro thought it incongruous. Then, as he cupped a match in his hand, she saw he wore a new ring.

"What a beautiful thing," she said unthinkingly, "your ring, Excellency."

The match fell blazing into Hamid's hand; he closed his fingers on it. The ring was pressed against his robe. He made no comment on Caro's exclamation; instead, very eagerly he said, leaning forward so that he could see her eyes:

"Tell me now, you are glad that you came?"

Caro gave a little laugh.

"So glad! You can have no idea. At first I was, I think, puzzled, overwhelmed; then I was intrigued; then"—her voice sank a little—"then I was possessed, taken entire possession of by the stillness, the wonder of it, the radiance——"

"And yet, so far, you have not known desert life," Hamid said very quietly. "The real life, as we live it. Some day I shall show you that."

He was looking at her very directly, and though his eyes were tranquil, Caro felt suddenly as if he had said something of vast importance, something he had longed to say, and she felt confused—almost a sense of fear.

Quickly she said:

"You will dine with me, will you not, Excellency?"

Hamid laughed. He answered boyishly:

"Madame, I shall be honoured. Madame, I crave your indulgence; a great favour—that you call me by my name."

The sudden twilight was falling. It brought with it that gift of intimacy, of easier talking which makes a friendship grow between people more swiftly than anything else.

Hamid talked on, asking about Saria, Hassan, the running of the villa, recalling Paris. . . . It grew darker. His cigarette end studded the dusk like a tiny jewel; as he drew on it his face showed, the line of his throat.

His native dress was at once an attraction and an anomaly. Caro did not know now in the darkness whether it pleased her or disturbed her a little; it seemed to make Hamid a little more like other people (even like the ubiquitous Hassan !), and before he had had a definite distinction.

His voice came to her:

"Of what are you thinking, Caro?"

It was the first time he had ever said her name.

Caro answered with a little nervous laugh:

"Of you——" She too paused, and then did not indulge the moment.

"Of me? Tell me. Please tell me. I want to know. I should love to."

"But they were very little thoughts, too trivial to repeat really, thoughts about dress——"

There was a note of pleased vanity in his voice as he answered:

"In the desert one must wear the appropriate dress, do you not think?"

"It is very decorative," Caro said.

Hassan came to announce dinner. He placed Hamid's hand against his own brow and bowed low.

To Caro it seemed extraordinary to be dining with this new Hamid. At any rate, he assumed European customs at table, and with that disconcerting intuition which was sometimes his, said suddenly:

"I believe you were afraid I should call for my servant and go through the ceremonial!" He was obviously very amused, and his amusement made Caro feel *farouche*, as if she had committed some solecism, and yet Hamid's laughter seemed to her an impertinence in some way.

Restraint fell upon her; her light-hearted happiness faded.

Later, walking in the garden in the wonderful enshrouding darkness, the curious momentary distaste which had, for a second perhaps, amounted almost to repulsion, died. Hamid talked well. He sounded so—so—— Caro sought for a word and failed to find one. She wanted to express in the word that Hamid's presence was attractive after all; that he did not grate on her. . . .

For the first time she noticed he used scent. It was only a faint perfume, but a very potent one, and she guessed a very rare one.

She said, her sentence following her thought:

"Oh, what scent do you use? It is extraordinarily good."

"It is a native scent," Hamid said. "One cannot buy it; it has to be made. It is an essence which is difficult to obtain. We call it in French '*l'heure exquise!*'"

His voice sounded closer. Caro felt he was looking at her, and absurdly she coloured, even in the darkness.

"What a beautiful name," she said in a banal way.

Hamid added:

"What a beautiful thing to possess, madame: one *heure exquise*, to remember all one's life."

She was glad he had not called her by her name again. As he moved his burnous touched her, flowing over her in a white wave of warmth and perfume.

"Ah! forgive me," Hamid said; he stretched his hand out to restore the woollen folds, and, as he did

so, he touched Caro's throat almost imperceptibly and apologized again.

"Where is your camp?" Caro asked him.

He pointed to the west.

"Over there, nearer the mountains."

"Then you have to cross the Nile," Caro exclaimed, astonished.

"Why not? I have a felucca."

"Oh, I see," Caro said rather flatly. Her mind clung to material interests, or rather she decided to discuss material interests, and she began to ask Hamid now about Mir Jokim, the Persian rose grower, the owner of the villa. She asked, too, if his French wife had been very devoted to him, whether their lives at the villa had been that chosen radiant loneliness which a *grande passion* inspires two people to attempt.

"Because for a Frenchwoman to have lived here, in the desert, for years, says so much—and says far too little," Caro finished, "for a romantic being! I want to know more. I think so much of her when I read her books and lean my head against the embroidery her fingers created. Was she very beautiful, very fascinating, Hamid el Alim? And was her life the poem of a *grande passion?*"

Hamid said, ignoring the later question:

"So you think that for a woman to live in the desert must be a sacrifice?"

"Yes, I think that for a *femme du monde*, a woman who has lived the varied, full life of cities, it would be a sacrifice in a sense, the sacrifice of interests, friends, diversion. Surely that is obvious?"

"Do you think that those things—interests, friends, amusements—would count if she loved, and if, to be with the man she loved, she had to live in the desert?"

Caro hesitated, her own new-born belief in romance reproached her for her half-heartedness to its cause.

"It is so impossible to say, to give a definite answer to such a question," she said at last.

"Is it? For me it would not be. I would sacrifice anything, my life, the lives of others, any interest, any single thing, all things if you will, to be able to say once to the woman for whom I did this 'I love you,' and hear her answer."

He spoke in a very low voice, and, despite its slowness, its gentleness, it beat like a caged thing against the encircling peace of the garden, Caro's self-possession. It quickened a strange tension which had risen whilst he had been speaking between them, and both felt that clash of nerves which is bound to come when men and women talk openly of love.

Suddenly it seemed to Caro the scent of the orange grove became too heavy; it was like a very living thing, exciting, intoxicating.

In all her life she had never consciously analysed the power of personality, a man's personality when he is in love; but now, *malgré lui*, she acknowledged to herself that Hamid possessed some strength, either of will or desire, which impressed itself on her.

He looked gigantic, eminently picturesque in the keen starlight. His white burnous flowed out a little as he walked; it gave him an air of command, of young, lithe dignity. He halted now beside an orange tree and bruised a leaf between his fingers. He did not know how to keep his hands from touching Caro, to refrain from drawing her to him. He had himself gripped hard, but that unceasing fire of headlong, self-willed adoration was burning away his barriers little by little.

In a queer, breathless voice he said to her, almost on a note of command:

"You expected me to come?"

Again Caro was angry to feel the colour racing on a wild tide into her face.

"I hoped you would, of course. It is nice to see you," she said, aware of the banality of her words, her stilted voice.

Hamid laughed.

"You indeed make me feel welcome when your tones—How do you say it?—cut like a knife at one!"

"No, no," Caro murmured, fighting her embarrassment, "indeed, really, I was charmed to see you. One does get a little lonely, in spite of the loveliness, you know."

"Because of it," Hamid answered, and she was relieved he spoke easily, without either irony or that curious violence which had seemed to underlie his words.

"It was my imagination," she told herself.

In point of fact it was, paradoxically, her nearness which had stilled Hamid's mood; he had been consumed with longing for it, now, quite unconsciously, in stretching up to draw down a spray of flowers, Caro was leaning against him, for his hand had easily outreached hers, and as she stood so, almost enveloped in his burnous, all the fragrance of her, the wholly innocent lure rose like incense to his brain, momentarily soothing its wildness; she was here within his grasp almost, he was beside her, at last, at last!

And yet, with that perversity of enjoyment, that power of subordinating the moment to the hour to come, of indulging anticipation, which is so often a trait in an Arab of trained mind, Hamid now drew back; he burnt to sweep Caro up to him, annihilate his passion in possessing her, but, quite deliberately, he drew back, reined in his thoughts, his subtlety told him it was too soon; and he had the fatalist's gift of waiting, of inexorable patience.

They walked on, the rose-wind caressing them, the Nile murmuring to them, and Hamid spoke of the rides they would go together. He said finally:

"You will come to see my camp, will you not?"

"I should love to. Tell me about it."

His voice was amused as he answered:

"Once upon a time a Sheik rode into the desert——"

"He did not start in a train, by any chance?"

"Have you no sense of fairy-tale romance? What hero ever started anywhere in any train? Of course, true to the tale, this Sheik rode out into the desert to pay his devoirs——"

"We know about that. What was his camp like from which he rode?"

"To pay his devoirs to a fair princess who lived in a garden of roses."

"Scheherezade!" Caro murmured.

"In a garden of roses. She——"

"His tent——"

"Ah, I am no story-teller, or you no listener. Madame, *eh bien!* My tent is very large, it has three doors, three rooms, and certain rugs you could not buy in all Persia to-day. It has the furnishing of a simple room, divans, cushions, the furnishing of a room such as we Egyptians have. Perhaps you do not know such a room, though?" His voice changed suddenly, held a sneer. "English stage producers do not, I assure you! Always on the stage in England, where it is wished to represent an Egyptian room, there are cheap spangled *portières* galore, quantities of extraordinary-shaped smoking-tables, all bearing the pipe in which we smoke hashish (and which we do not smoke in such rooms!), and all looking like the black-and-white spotted dog, of such curious wood are they! Then there are many palms, generally in Indian brass pots, and girls attired mostly as nautch-girls, in perpetual fancy dress, roam about freely under porches all white painted and hideously carven! That is the English idea of an Egyptian's room, the Egyptian's scheme of art, interior decoration! And Egypt *gave* art to the world!"

There was mordant resentment in his speech and it awoke a dissentient warmth in Caro.

"But you are making exactly the same mistake as the unfortunate and no doubt dreadfully hedonistic stage-producer!" she said. "You, too, are judging out of ignorance. If you have once seen such a misrepresentation, I have seen a dozen times the most beautiful and dignified representations of Egyptian life. Tree's *Antony and Cleopatra*—Sardou's——"

Hamid flung out his hands impatiently.

"Yes, oh yes! Egypt as she *was*, I grant you; but, Madame, Egypt also *is*, and it is to-day's lack of value, to-day's misrepresentations I deplore and despise. Even you, I think, cannot defend the English outlook concerning my country."

"I know too little about it," Caro said, "but I can and will defend her defence of your ancient marvels, your wonderful art. Even you will own, will you not, that British care, British appreciation have preserved these lovelinesses to the world!"

"Appreciation! Care!" Hamid repeated; he gave a smothered laugh. "For those words I would substitute, by your leave, one of quite different significance, but the true significance, I venture to think: British exploitation! It is not because Egypt's immortalities are beautiful the British and French have preserved them, but because they make a Protectorate a paying concern!"

Then, as swiftly, his voice changed again, and he said with a certain mischievous penitence:

"Forgive me! After all, what does it matter to-night what becomes of Egypt's art or British appreciation?"

"No, I know," Caro agreed instantly, but mischief stirred in her courtesy too, "but do tell me, if Egypt was entirely her own, would you neglect the dividends this exploitation of her art, which distresses you so much, afford her?"

She really could not resist this inquiry, her voice

held *raillerie,* and Hamid answered on that note, not to her question at all; he said:

"I adore to hear you speak; it is as if your voice ripples in little cooling waves across the tiredness of my mind. You remember, long ago, I told you you had a wonder-working voice—I told you that day in the wood——"

"I remember," Caro said nervously; again, within herself she drew back, not frightened, but apprehensive.

Quite definitely then, she said:

"It is very late, I am sure. I must go in."

Hamid neither pleaded nor remonstrated, he took her to the door, kissed her hand, and walked away to seek his horse.

A little later, from the bedroom, Caro heard quick, flying hoofs; she looked out, Hamid was riding away, she thought now of the absurd little fairy story—like the fairy prince beneath the stars.

Unconsciously she listened until the last echo of his horse's hoofs had died away.

Well, her loneliness had been most effectually dissipated!

Was she glad or sorry?

She did not know.

Hamid was certainly a very attractive being in his Sheik's robes, but, nevertheless, though the effectiveness pleased her artistic sense, Hamid, as this being, a Sheik, an Egyptian desert prince, did not; he had had a rather curious influence on Caro's mood: as he had been to-night, his real self, perhaps for the first time his very real self with her, he had awakened in her a very faint and indefinable, hostile criticism.

She felt as though she were blaming him for something he could not help, and the idea made her at once amused and irritated, but she could not shake it off.

Hassan, strolling in the garden after having brought round Hamid's horse, looked up at her window and said:

"Very great, rich gentlemans Sheik el Alim. Able to keep so many dancing girls, so——"

"I will ride to-morrow, we will go towards Rizah," Caro interrupted him. She said "Good night," and drew back from the window.

Hassan's frank and admiring views on the enjoyments possible to a man of Hamid's wealth and power were, for some reason, the very last thing she wanted just then to hear.

Then, like a quick-change artist, Hamid arrived in the morning in white riding clothes, the only distinguishing mark of his race being the tarboosh which he wore really like a distinction—so good looking and smart did it appear on him.

He called gaily to Caro:

"Come and ride!"

"I should love to," she called back, and hurried Saria. She looked about sixteen as she ran through the roses towards Hamid, and in a second she was on her horse and eager to start.

"I adore riding in the desert," she said gaily, and gave a sigh of sheer pleasure.

They raced their horses and Hamid won; he had a superb beast, built like a racer, but, too, he told Caro, of iron endurance.

"He is from my stud, Ali," he said simply. "My father and I ride only our own blood horses."

The light was so clear that the palms in the distance looked quite black against the argent blueness of the sky.

All Caro's half-understood and, in any case, very faint hostility had faded quite away. She was one with the loveliness of the morning, with the gaiety of Hamid's mood.

She said suddenly:

"Your camp must be very near here for you to have ridden in so quickly this morning?"

"It is not very far," Hamid answered; "but desert distances are so deceiving!"

He did not think it necessary to explain that he had spent the night in the village, and, had he known of Hassan's freedom of speech, would have put a stringent check upon that worthy's glib revelations.

This morning his own mood, too, was different, he had a child's love of diversion, and as he had been very diverted at the café a little of the fever of impatience had cooled in him now.

Caro and he lunched beside the temple off dates and sandwiches and cold black coffee, and Hamid's special, excellent cigarettes.

He walked about the temple later, translating the hieroglyphics for Caro.

"It was a temple built to the goddess of Light," he said slowly, coming back and sitting down beside her, stretching out, leaning upon one elbow and gazing into her face.

"And now the light has claimed it wholly," Caro said softly. "See how it pours over it."

Her eyes rested on the grey pillars drenched in the hot sunshine, Hamid's rested on her, and it was in that moment, as if his glance touched her for his own satisfaction, as if his lips, too, rested on her lids, the smooth curve of her cheek, her parted lips and the white hollow of her throat.

Caro felt that glance; it mesmerized her, held her, she could not turn her head, and she knew that Hamid was smiling.

Then his voice said quite coolly:

"Of what are you thinking?" And she felt able to face him.

Such reassurance and a conviction of her own intensely vain stupidity! He still rested in the same position and he still looked very English!

When they were leaving, without asking if he might do it, he lifted her on to her horse quite effortlessly, he was not even breathing quickly, Caro noticed.

She said with a little laugh:

"You are very strong, Excellency."

He waited beside her, his eyes an entreaty.

"Madame!"

She had to say it, and really, after all, it meant nothing!

"Hamid!" she exclaimed in answer to that look.

He burst out laughing, and they started to ride home.

* * * * *

Then for a day he did not come, and Caro expected him hourly.

The evening was very lonely, lonelier perhaps than ever, because it held expectancy which slowly denied itself.

In his camp Hamid made fantasia, he had had dancing girls brought in, and they danced before him in the glow of the huge flaring fire his servants had lighted.

He watched them, thinking of Caro, thinking of himself and her shut in the shelter of the great white tent, and without, all about them, like so many guardians of his love, the dark and gleaming faces of the Arabs.

He was savagely glad to be back in his life, the only life where he could live as he chose and be praised for so living. These men, some from tribes by themselves forgotten, and others followers of his father, lived by him, and for him; content, too, to steal their pleasures, discard them, destroy them, ride on.

All owned one god, one faith, and served that faith, and one master, Hamid.

As the tom-toms blared and the flames roared and the Arabs swayed to the music, Hamid pictured this scene, this wild and maddening music, and beside him Caro.

CHAPTER XXII

"Didst ever say, 'Lo, I forget'?
Such thought was to remember yet."
—DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI.

"I MAY as well go home. I had better," Sforza told himself, and stayed on.

She must return some day!

He would be just as lonely in his home as here in Cairo—and farther off.

Perhaps the first genuine happiness he had felt for months was his as he saw from the terrace Barry Tempest, Rita and Tim drive up to the hotel.

Rita saw him instantly and waved; she thought as Sforza ran down the steps to meet them how fine-drawn he looked, and how shadowed his eyes had become.

Almost at once she asked him:

"Where is Caro Cleveland? In her rooms?"

Everything she had ever guessed she knew by the tones in Sforza's voice as he said:

"Mrs. Cleveland left for the desert two weeks ago."

Rita gave a little exclamation, then said:

"How long will she be away? I suppose it was an expedition? She has gone with a crowd? It is most unfortunate she should be away, it could not be more so, because we have come here on a special errand, a rather sad one."

Barry, having arranged everything as he wished, strolled up with Tim.

"Hallo!" he said to Sforza, greeting him as if they had parted at lunch time, when, in point of fact, they had not met for ten years. "Bit of luck your being here. Seen Essex? Had much trouble?

Thought so, and we'll get a packet more pretty soon from all I hear. I didn't want Rita to come, but she would. Anyway, we can clear out on the fifth."

Sforza's mind was tense with anxiety. What had happened? What was wrong? What was the sad errand?

He had to let the Tempests go off to their rooms to bath and change; he waited on the terrace, absently watching the crowd. At last, after a long while it seemed to him, Barry appeared, leisurely as ever, a cigar in his mouth, hands deep thrust into pockets.

He said "Hallo" again to Sforza, and this repetition, acting on his strained nerves, the ridiculous value it had because of his anxiety, made Sforza smile a twisted smile.

He, too, said, as impersonally, "Hallo!"

Barry considered the view, the wine list and his own desires.

He ordered beer.

Then he said:

"Bad business this," and stopped saying any more.

Sforza waited.

"Rita says you told her Mrs. Cleveland was in the desert. Where? How far off?"

"I am not quite certain," Sforza said. "The manager will know, of course."

"Who's she gone with?"

"I think Mrs. Cleveland took her maid."

Barry sniffed.

"You don't mean to say she's gone alone?"

Sforza could bear no implied criticism of Caro. He answered more stiffly than he knew:

"I think so—yes."

"Well, I'm damned," Barry ejaculated. He sank into the apathy of those who, never thinking very deeply, are stunned with astonishment when everything calls for concentrated mentality. Then Rita

appeared in white, looking delightful, and Tim, in spotless flannels and his Harrow coat.

Sforza thought "now I shall hear," and heard Barry inquiring as if it were a matter of vital interest whether Rita would have tea or coffee, and if Tim would also like beer?

Perhaps Rita read Sforza's eyes, perhaps she knew Barry's method of procedure. She said gravely:

"Marchese, we have very sad news for poor Caro. Her husband died last Friday; he had caught some fever, apparently, and he died on board ship; a day after he had come into his uncle's title and fortune. You remember you heard Caro and me talk of Lord Wiltshire? He was John's uncle. The solicitors wired to Caro in Paris, of course; you remember John's wire went there? I opened the telegram, and then I decided—Barry thought we had better come direct here. How far away is Caro? Within reach of a telegram, of course?"

"I think so—I am uncertain," Sforza answered in a constrained voice. He could realize only one thing: she was free—utterly free—and in the desert—with Hamid el Alim.

His very soul felt convulsed with jealousy—until that moment her boundness had been to him, despite his loss upon her, a blessing; he had blessed it in his own mind. It held her off from him, but it held off, too, others from her.

He had no fear at all of Caro's failing herself; he knew her fine, if she were wilful; clean-souled if she were passionate. It was impossible for him to think of her as soiled, it was impossible for him to think of her doing a base thing.

Her bondage had been his freedom in a sense.

Now she was free, utterly, and it was quite possible el Alim knew this.

Why he himself had seen no mention of it in the papers he did not know, except that, of late, his interest in most things had been so superficial.

Barry's voice reached him:

"I'd better go to the manager, get her address and send off a wire."

"We might go ourselves; personally, I have always looked forward to a desert pilgrimage," Tim said blandly.

His father laughed.

"Not in these riots, thanks, Tim!"

As he walked away Rita said to Sforza:

"Barry has inside information, I think. We came over with some men who were very pessimistic about the internal situation. Giovanni, do you know the people Caro is with at the villa?"

Sforza said: "I think Mrs. Cleveland went alone—of course, she took her maid."

"Alone?" Rita echoed, her fine brows drew together. "But—but," she gave an embarrassed little laugh, "How conventional one is, even when one says one isn't!" she confided to Sforza. "There isn't any real reason whatever why Caro shouldn't have gone alone, you know, but still, she just shouldn't! Where *is* the place, anyway?"

"I think it is south of Luxor."

"But that's a long journey, a night and day affair almost!"

A silence fell between them; Rita stared at her tea, her under-lip caught in, her face at once worried and annoyed; Tim was wholly occupied in gazing into the street. "Do look," he kept murmuring; and then, not waiting for companionship in his curiosity, his interest would tear off to another novelty; Sforza was sick within himself, conscious only of a chill, bitter suspense.

Barry appeared, walking quite fast for him; he had thrown away his cigar; he came to the table, sat down and said in a level voice: "Fregori gave me the address: I tried to send a telegram through, and couldn't. So I telephoned the Embassy, and got hold of Faversham. The wires have been cut!"

He looked round, then added with surprising vehemence for him, "I wish we'd never come to this place; that I'd never let you two," he glared at Rita and Tim, "at any rate," he said, the-British-lion-will-now-stamp-his-foot mood very evident in his outraged voice. "At any rate, you two'll clear out at the earliest opportunity."

Tim turned round, indignant remonstrance on his lips, met his mother's faintly amused, tender glance and subsided, trying too to adopt her expression of irony, which was so delightful. She said to Barry:

"Well, darling, you know best, always."

Sforza was thinking only: "They are concerned with themselves—and she——"

He rose, and said rather bleakly, a strained smile round his mouth:

"It is all right, Tempest; I mean, I believe I can help you in this crisis. I had intended to leave for the desert to-night to meet my brother; I had a message two days ago from him. I will see Mrs. Cleveland, deliver any message or note you care to send, and accompany Mrs. Cleveland back to Cairo."

Barry, still in his British-lion mood, did not care to glance at Rita, but his eyes strayed in her direction; finally he said:

"That's uncommon good of you, Sforza, and I'm grateful. It lifts a rather heavy responsibility from my shoulders——" (Rita still kept her charming profile to him; women were very dense sometimes . . . slow to pick up a fellow's thoughts. . . . Pity followed on to Barry's aggravation at Rita's shelving of her share of the mutual burden. . . .) "Really, it's awfully decent of you," he wound up lamely, and then struck out with a "isn't it, Rita?"

Rita returned from the land of surmise, and glanced at Sforza; the hesitant amusement had quite left her eyes, she looked serious and rather sad.

"It is good of you," she said very gently, "I do

not quite know what we should have done if you had not come forward to help."

"I will go and arrange for my journey, I think," Sforza said; "perhaps you will instruct me when I come back. I have my ticket to get, and I believe I had better plan out my means of travel when I leave the railway. You will excuse me." He walked away quickly and vanished amongst the crowd.

Barry leant forward.

"This is serious," he said. "Faversham says things look very ugly. I'm off to the Embassy. I'll be back in an hour." He was preparing his cigar, now he put it in his mouth, lit it, and then said slowly: "Jolly rum, don't you think, Caro going off like this——" His eyes interrogated Rita, they said as plainly as if he had spoken: "D'you think there's anything behind it?" Rita's smile was a dissent; Barry's mental effort collapsed into comfortable inattention.

* * * * *

"Can it be? Can it be? It can't. It's impossible. But if it is?" Rita asked herself miserably.

She could tell her fears to no one, but she was possessed by them.

She knew Caro to be careless of convention, or rather unaware of it, but even the most gaily heedless person could hardly consider this last adventure a reasonable affair . . . a villa in the desert, miles from anywhere, anyone!

Was Caro miles from anyone?

Rita's hands had been lying idly on the table; now, suddenly, they closed tensely, she felt an actual repulsion as she faced the idea which had presented itself.

Where *was* Hamid el Alim? If he were still in Cairo—then——

Despite her natural reserve, which was even stronger in operation for her friends than for herself, she said to Barry:

"I wonder where Prince Hamid is?"

"That Egyptian feller, good-looking chap?" Barry answered.

"Yes."

"Oh, well out of this mess-up, I would say," Barry opined. "Probably in one of his many palaces. They have no end of houses, these millionaire princes."

"If he's in Cairo it would be rather fun to see him."

"The Embassy'd know."

"You might ring up some time."

She longed to say "ring up now," but did not; and moreover she longed to ring up herself and ask point-blank, "Is Prince Hamid in Cairo, or in the desert, at the Villa Zohra?"

And she could not ask Sforza, that was unthinkable. Each new aspect of the situation, as it presented itself to her, made it seem worse. The world would not believe Caro had not heard of her husband's death; this action of hers, this sojourn in the desert, if John's family heard of it would, naturally, seem monstrous to them; a breach not of conventionality, but of honour, of the courtesy of life, itself.

Of course, in Cairo the papers would already have mentioned Caro's absence in Egypt; the double tragedy which had come so suddenly would make her a conspicuous figure for the moment.

Then——

Rita left the terrace and went to her room and walked up and down, her mood torn with anxiety.

Barry looked in.

"I say, Sforza's turned up. Thought you'd better come down and fix up what he's to say to Caro."

"I'll come now," Rita said.

She wished she might talk with Sforza alone, and yet admitted, if the chance occurred, she would not know quite what to say.

Sforza met her at the foot of the steps. He smiled at her, and she thought for the hundredth time what a delightful smile he had: it transfigured his face, making even his look of reserve suggest it could be displaced by boyishness; his eyes always laughed before his lips.

Rita knew at once, quite definitely:

"He is so thankful to be going near Caro, to have made up his mind, that all else is subordinate to that gladness."

She had not believed for a moment that he had arranged to leave that evening.

Sforza was in easy riding kit, a soft shirt, cool linen breeches and coat, and riding boots of brown Russian leather, only blocked to the ankle. Riding clothes show off most men, they are also the last disguise any man who affects a position to which he is not entitled, should adopt. They suited Sforza admirably, and he looked younger in them.

Tim drew his mother's attention to the cut of his riding breeches about the knee.

"Perfect," he said with that solemnity the topic warranted. "Note the symmetry, Mother, of his figure, too. Admirable, isn't it?"

Sforza's grace, his good looks, which were not striking looks at all, but an effect due to his air of breeding, made Rita feel wistful somehow, touched her heart; a queer little maternal impulse made her want him to be admired, want, for him, some woman to love those fine limbs Tim so ungrudgingly admired, his well-cut head, and quick, responsive smile. It all seemed such a waste. . . .

Her thoughts had completed the circle—come back to Hamid.

She had hated his beauty and strength in Paris, now she loathed them.

"How soon do you think you can get back?" she asked Sforza.

He considered.

"I hope by Tuesday."

"Five days!" Dismay was in her voice.

"Perhaps less. But you see, Mrs. Tempest, the journey is long, and Mrs. Cleveland might have moved. One cannot tell."

Rita ventured one question, was impelled to do so.

"Is anyone near her she knows, any friend?"

Sforza's dark, clear eyes met hers, and she knew he would tell her nothing.

"I am afraid I know so little of Mrs. Cleveland's movements."

She nodded.

"It is all so very unfortunate, her absence at such a time—— However——"

"It is indeed most unfortunate for Mrs. Cleveland."

"And that isn't even her name now, but one cannot accustom oneself to new names very easily!"

"No. I think I must go, Mrs. Tempest. I will give your letter into——" they both laughed, and Rita supplied, "Lady Wiltshire's hands"—"myself. Good-bye then."

Tim went off to the station with him; they talked of Baldi and the Paris days, of Tim's new term, and Sforza told him how sorry he had been to hear of his illness.

"Distressing disease, dashed inconvenient," Tim agreed, "'Fraid I gave my people a thin time. I've grown though since then," he added, "paradoxical, isn't it? the effect illness has on one, lays you out, lengthens you out too! I am attaining an altitude which causes bystanders to stare!"

"How tall are you, Tim?" Sforza asked.

"Six foot;" his hand tightened on Sforza's arm, "I pretend not to like it, but I do, and I should hate to be a nonentity, should not you?"

"I should," Sforza agreed gravely.

"I say," Tim said, "where's that Mammoth-

Rameses, the Prince el Alim, who called on us in Paris? Have you seen him lately?"

"No."

"That's a let-off," Tim remarked frankly. "I couldn't stick him. Oh, I say," belated contrition seized him, "I do hope you—er—had not developed great partiality for him, Marchese."

"No," Sforza said again.

Tim was relieved, but not surprised.

"You wouldn't," he assured Sforza; "the chap was a bounder, I consider."

He waved Sforza off; Sforza had loved having him, and Tim meditated on how much he liked "Giovanni" as he sauntered home, attracting glances varied and many, ridiculously conscious of them, and rather liking it. He went very pink when bright eyes above a yashmâk smiled at him.

He said to his mother, offering seasoned comment on that portion of Egypt he had already seen:

"Er—rather provocative effect the yashmâk induces, Mother, don't you think? Very subtle idea, what?"

* * * * *

In the streets of Luxor a beggar whined persuasively at Sforza's elbow; he had the Latin spirit of gentleness towards all infirmity and even Egyptian beggars had not quite reft it from him, he thrust a hand into a pocket——

The beggar said in perfect English—Robert's voice—"Travel with my caravan to-night: it leaves the Eastern gate at moonrise——"

Then with a shriek of gratitude in which he commended Allah and Sforza, and avowed his fidelity to both, he went off.

Sforza, feeling like a minor player in some melodrama, went on his way, wondering a little; he had watched the political situation more closely before Caro's departure, since that date his interest had slackened; now because of Barry's anxiety, the latest

bulletins friends of his own had given to him, interest recurred to him.

But his concern was not with intrigue in that moment, it was solely with Caro, to find her, take her back to Cairo.

He idled through the evening, wishing it gone, impatient of departure.

He dismissed his own guide, paying him off handsomely, and started for Robert's starting place.

As he passed a café on the outskirts of the town a voice called to him; he recognized it and went in. The place was dirty, deserted, and depressing; Robert sat, in his beggar's rags, huddled in a corner, smoking.

He rose now and beckoned to Sforza and withdrew behind a tattered curtain.

Sforza followed him.

"Here," Robert said, thrusting a bundle into his arms, "change quick—I'm off. Bring your own clothes in a bundle to the caravan. Get a move on."

He had gone before Sforza could question him, or remonstrate; he looked at the native dress, it was clean, even good, and rather picturesque. He put it on, with much difficulty; the linen drawers, like an English footballer's shorts, the muslin shirt, the shoes, he understood, but the kûftan worried him, and the turban; finally he was ready, and he set off, his bundle hidden under his cloak.

Half a mile off an Arab waited, saluted him in native fashion and joined him.

"I suppose you're feeling ridiculous at having to dress up," Robert asked him, and——

"I am wondering, just as much, what on earth induced you to try a desert trip at such a time?"

The night, his own weariness of soul, the need even the strongest nature has for sympathy sometimes, made Sforza say, quite simply:

"I have come to find Mrs. Cleveland and take her back to Cairo—her husband is dead—they were

to have been divorced—I love her, I have loved her ever since I first saw her."

Robert made no comment on that: instead he said, "Giovanni, d'you know where Mrs. Cleveland is?"

"At the Villa Zohra; it is outside the village of Ruspa."

"He does not know then," Robert said to himself, and he wondered furiously what he should say. If he loved any being in the world it was Sforza; he had had very little time to think of him in these latter years; but when he had been a boy and Sforza ten years his senior, he had had for him hero-worship; then school had kept him in England, and later, he had chosen a life apart from Sforza; but he was intensely proud of him, of his standing amongst men, of his war record, his integrity of soul, and, too, there was deep in Robert the clan-instinct: Sforza was head of the family and the family would cling together in trouble or hardship.

They walked in silence, until Sforza asked abruptly:

"Where exactly is Ruspa?"

"Off my route," Robert answered.

"How long will it take to get there?"

"On Tuesday evening you can call on Mrs. Cleveland. But we shall have to move if you wish to keep this social engagement," he added.

"What is it like—the Villa Zohra?" Sforza inquired; there was no suspicion in his voice.

"Why don't you ask to whom it belongs?" Robert said harshly; he could not bear this unsuspiciousness longer, the sense he had of concealment.

He knew Sforza drew in his breath, but he said to him in his usual voice:

"Hamid el Alim owns the villa."

It was not a question, but a statement.

Robert said tempestuously:

"El Alim has been in the desert for some time;

he is always with her. I rode past the villa; I meant to call, but I heard he was there. Of course, then I would not go—could not. What can you do? Nothing. She loves him. She must. She left Cairo after his marriage, or just before."

"*His marriage?*" Sforza echoed in a choked voice. Then instantly he recovered himself and said: "I had not heard of it."

"No?" Robert said. He felt almost suffocated with indignant sympathy, yet he could say nothing. He had lived away from Sforza for so long that that alone made things a little difficult between them; and then, too, all the while he had before him the vision of Caro dining at Shepheard's, himself and Sforza talking with her, her graciousness, her loveliness, his own conception of her. It appalled him that she should be the woman who could love Hamid; it filled him with wild humiliation for Sforza that he should have to love a woman who did this—could do it.

He had wondered, when he had thought of Sforza, whom he would marry. He knew his pride. He divined that love, marriage, to a man of his brother's type would mean more than it does to many men. Sforza had about him something which set him a little apart—perhaps, Robert thought miserably, it was his power to give, to love . . . some men were like that.

They came within sight of the caravan, which straggled out from the shelter of an overhanging wall.

A horse neighed suddenly.

"That's Nano," Robert said, sudden pride in his voice. He added: "Don't speak now. Keep close to me. I am in command here, but of late one occasionally wonders just how much that stands for!"

He mounted a camel and pointed to Sforza's. With snarling of camels, human imprecations, shouts, prayers, the shrill stampeding revolt of Robert's

horse against his leader, all the confusion and derangement of starting, the caravan moved off, the sand swirling about the camels' and the horses' feet.

As they swung out from the wall's shelter the moon rose, blood-red, immense, hanging like a passion-flower against the iron-blue foliage of the sky. Sforza sat, unconscious of his surroundings, of all things, unconscious even of thought, and yet thinking of but one thing, but so held, so driven by the terrible power of this thought, that it had ceased to be merely a thought and had become himself; all of him pulsed and struggled and suffered in it.

Until now he had scarcely known what he believed, feared; his sane balance had helped him to judge his own jealousy, he had placed little reliance on its promptings: now Robert had put into words, into truth, the actual facts.

And he knew now that even in his desperate hours he had not believed Caro had gone to Hamid's villa. She was the woman he loved, adored; it was impossible to conceive her acting cheaply, practising a paltry deception. It was possible to conceive her carrying out some outrageous plan in defiance of the world, doing it splendidly, however insane it might be. He could not think of her as having duped her husband—himself. She was a woman who would not lie easily, or, indeed, bother to lie at all.

And then the acid of self-contempt stung his wound; he gibed at himself for his defence of her.

"You fool!" His scorn upbraided him. "All you have in reality is the image you created of her! She is no child. This is the twentieth century, and she is a woman who knows her world. Is it, then, possible she did not know to whose villa she was going, or the manner of man to whom she gave her trust?"

Chill rationality was against him; all that was for him was his dream.

He tried not to think of the things which forced themselves into his mind—all these days in the desert, alone with Hamid el Alim. He wished he could make the camel race; he longed for some violent movement which should meet his mood, exorcise it by its violence.

Beneath this very moon somewhere Caro stood, perhaps close to el Alim. Sforza's breath caught like a hot flame in his throat.

He had waited all these years to love, and now——

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" his mind sobbed. It was as if in truth his mind wept in its anguish, in the terrible exhaustion it felt from thought—these thoughts which flagellated its open wounds.

He had never known a man could feel such jealousy, always he had despised it in others, looked on it as the cheap result of self-indulgence, the self-torment of a self-pitying weakling, but now——

It was as if wave after wave of icy bitterness went over him, and then a scorching blast.

He "saw" Caro and Hamid, he knew the look there would be in Hamid's eyes, he could hear the tone of his voice. . . .

With an effort which shook him physically and made the sweat gather under his hair he forced control on himself and his thoughts.

He moved his camel nearer to Robert's. They two were riding ahead alone; the caravan plodded behind.

Robert's eyes gleamed out from the folds of his turban.

"You look an Arab all right," he said in a carrying whisper. He peered forward. "Pretty white, aren't you, or is it the moon? Don't feel ill, do you—the motion of the camel? You could have a horse if you like."

"No, I am quite all right. Robert, where is el Alim's camp?"

"Beyond mine. Farther in."

Sforza nodded, reined away again; the camel surged onwards.

The hours passed, the light broke, and the voice of the muezzin proclaimed to the Moslem world the glory of its god.

Sforza, imitating Robert, prayed ostensibly. There was a little halt for coffee and dates, then on again, across an apparently tractless waste, where coarse shrubs grew, and where you ploughed up and down dunes. To the far east the mountains showed, dull-looking, not very high; and the heat was nearly intolerable.

Then, out of the whirling blue of the sky, apparently, a band of horsemen appeared, riding down on the caravan.

Robert gave some order. In incredibly quick time the camels were tethered, forming a square of defence, and the Arabs were ready.

"Raiding party," Robert said shortly to Sforza. "Got your revolver? The men are keen. Look at 'em!"

Sforza looked. He saw dark faces a-grin, teeth glittering. Each face had the glare of hatred on it, it seemed to him. There was no jesting, no clean love of battle. This was blood-lust he saw.

The marauding party opened like a fan as it bore down, then charged, closing up as it drew near.

"El Alim's men," Robert said, and fired at a man riding in the centre, a gorgeous figure in gold and white.

A man of their own was hurt—a camel—another; two men fell from their horses and were dragged along by the terrified beasts, their hoofs battering the helpless bodies; then, with a wild yell, the leader rode down on Robert. There was a shot, and he vaulted clear from the saddle with a magnificent leap and landed almost on to Robert.

Sforza had been watching. He fired as the golden

figure twisted, and it fell on to Robert, then sagged downwards and lay at his feet.

The Arabs were fighting hand to hand now; there was no time to wait or question. Sforza and Robert plunged in. Sforza felt his left arm hit. He saw Robert on his knees, he saw him up again, the sand was stinging and irritating. A man near, trying to get at Sforza, opened his mouth suddenly and pitched forward. Robert was calling: Sforza heard the word "storm"; his head turned irresolutely. Were the attackers tiring, or were they beaten?

Some half-dozen men were riding off at a furious rate.

Robert's hand gripped his arm like a vice.

"Sand-storm," he yelled, and pulled Sforza backwards as, it seemed to him, a solid bank of sand rose and rushed towards him.

He huddled beside Robert, eyes, mouth stinging and burning. The noise was terrific, like hail beating and wind shrieking.

Then peace—no sound at all.

He wondered if it were a lull or the end.

Robert's voice, hoarse, hardly audible, said:

"All right—now."

Sforza rose, and saw about him the Arabs rising too, unimpressed, unconcerned.

Robert was attending to his horse. His cloak had long streaks of fresh blood on it. He finished his examination of his mare, then called to his men, who obeyed his call at once.

He made examination of their wounds, dressed them from the little box he took from his waist-cloth, ordered a remount.

Sforza waited for him to come up.

"What is that?" he asked, touching Robert's small square box.

"Iodine, cotton-wool," Robert said. "Hallo! you need doctoring. Here!"

He probed in Sforza's flesh wound for the bullet, extracted it, closed the lips of the wound, painted on iodine, and bound it up with a piece of lint.

"There you are!"

"It hurts diabolically," Sforza said half-grimacing, half-smiling.

"Cleanest way of healing things there is," Robert assured him sententiously; he added: "We'll be too late to reach the villa to-night. I must order a halt at the Ornasa oasis, the men will be tired."

Sforza looked back.

"Those others——?" his eyes expressed his thought.

"Leave 'em—they'd leave us—to the vultures," Robert said with perfectly natural disinterest.

"The vultures!" Sforza turned his eyes away from the golden form now partly sand-covered; the other coloured forms, which the Arabs had already rifled.

He mounted his camel, and the caravan went forward.

CHAPTER XXIII

" . . . Others may find another love as fair;
Upon her threshold I have laid my head,
The dust shall cover me, still lying there,
When from my body life and love have fled. . . .

" My breath is narrowed down to one long sigh
For a red mouth that burns my thoughts like fire;
When will that mouth draw near and make reply
To one whose life is straitened in desire?

" When I am dead, open my grave and see
The cloud of smoke that rises round thy feet.
In my dead heart the fire still burns for thee;
Yea, the smoke rises from my winding-sheet."

—DIVAN OF HAFIZ.

"TO-DAY," Hamid said, "I will show you the real desert, real desert life."

He looked at Caro standing in the strong sunshine, and his lips closed on the smile with which he had spoken; for a moment his face had that travesty of expression which is so ugly, which comes when you smile of fixed purpose, and behind that purpose your real one lies.

Caro was gazing at the roses, some of which had unfolded their loveliness to show their hearts, golden crowned.

She said idly:

"Do you know to-day is one of my very last days? Because it is, I must go back to Cairo on Saturday, and to-morrow will be spent in packing."

"Then to-day is the choice of Fate, as well as mine," Hamid answered.

His eyes, restless yet sombre, were on her flawless skin, the shine of her soft burnished hair; he thought that her hands just touching the crimson roses looked

like white butterflies hovering . . . his blood sang in his veins with the beauty of her, her exceeding fairness, a fairness perhaps only an Arab worships so fanatically.

His gaze travelled to the space—the blueness; he longed for movement, speed; his horse nosed his shoulder, its brilliant, shy eyes swerving all the while, its splendid body quivering too, for exercise.

Hamid put up a hand, and held the silken, vibrant head against himself.

He was in English riding kit, and he urged Caro, too, to wear it.

"Now!" he added.

"I was just going to change," Caro answered.

"It is the easiest dress for you," Hamid said, "though part of the way you must ride in a palanquin."

"We must be back by ten o'clock," Caro said. "Saria will fade away with anxiety if we are later! Simply, it can't be done! Ten o'clock is the time to come in. At least, so Saria declares, and she knows everything a really nice woman ought to know!"

Hamid said absurdly:

"Very good, madame!"

Whilst he waited, he lit cigarette after cigarette and threw them away, almost unsmoked; the wait, which was very short in reality, seemed to him interminable, he was nervous, apprehensive, but not for one second did he wish not to do what he was about to do; he thought of his "luck" still extraordinarily "in," nothing had hampered him so far in the carrying out of his wildest desire, and he admitted it to himself, his maddest desire.

It was true he had received a communication from Raboun Bey and one from his father, both wordy, specious, and indirect; he could afford to ignore them.

Later he would go back, re-order life, put it again in the semblance his father loved. But, waiting for

Caro, he felt that for the hours which were to be he had been born; he had "cared" countless times in his indulgent life, but he had never felt for any woman what he felt for this woman.

She had been unattainable, and to him terribly so, because she had been it unconsciously; he was just clever enough to realize there had been no withdrawal from motives of pleasure as an incitement; simply, he knew it quite well, she had been fascinated by his friendship and engrossed in her own affairs; he had had no nearer influence on her so far.

Even in these wonderful rose-scented days her charming friendliness had baffled him, held him at bay.

Yet he knew, as surely as he knew that night followed day, that within her passion slept. She had that capacity of feeling which so many women lack, she would be divine to love, which only women with a genius for understanding love ever can be—those women, Hamid knew, are rarest of all.

All women can be loved, but only women of extreme sensitiveness in love can give a lover radiant happiness; to love is one thing, to know love another.

And Hamid had recognized that Caro had this gift and could transform the life of the man she loved from a level of well-being to a swifter plane altogether, where experience was keener, life itself more alive.

Unhappiness had taught her much, her marriage with John had balanced her. . . .

"When she is mine—when she is mine," Hamid thought to himself with closed eyes. He visioned no denial from Caro, no resentment, he had had the wildest success with women always, and those qualities which had helped him before now blinded him in his judgment of Caro; he thought of her as a type apart in personality, but emotionally he placed her in the same category as all other women, his inbred outlook, the heritage of his valuation of women made him do so unquestioningly.

He could differentiate between types of women, but not between certain qualities they possessed. To him all women, in one essential, were alike, their acquiescence to the ruling of man.

Perhaps they rebelled, perhaps they denied; *tant pis!* but also, he smiled reminiscently, more fun!

Already, with a sort of nonchalance of soul, which was terrifying, he could look ahead to a time when Caro would have ceased to be the sun and stars of his heaven.

But for to-day, to-night—!

Caro came out into the garden and crossed to the horses, and Hamid lifted her into the saddle, then mounted himself, and they turned in the direction of the sun and set forth to ride into the sunset.

Caro turned to wave her riding crop to Saria and Fleet as they stood in the garden, seeing her off as usual, just as they had been wont to do in Curzon Street; their figures grew smaller as the distance widened.

"Oh, this is gorgeous!" Caro said. "This air, this light and adventure before us! Where are you taking me, Hamid?"

"To see my camp. It will interest you. I think we can just do it and be back by ten."

His voice held an odd note, so odd that Caro turned and looked at him; he was laughing, and his laughter, for some inexplicable reason, made her feel horribly shy.

"You are amused?" she asked.

"At your description of your maid's idea of virtue!"

Caro smiled doubtfully; the queer distaste his laughter had awakened in her still lingered, she could not have described what she felt, but she knew it was not pleasure.

They rode in silence for a little way, passing through the village at a quick canter.

"There is good dancing there," Hamid said, and

Caro had a momentary picture of him sitting on the raised bank which ran at one end of the room, applauding those girls she had seen who had disgusted her.

"Do you like that—your sort of dancing?" she asked him frankly.

His eyes, glittering with amusement, dwelt on her face.

"And if you do how rather distressing of you!" he replied mockingly, and he added almost defiantly, "Yes, of course I like it. What I cannot appreciate, I fear, is the English dancing, which allows men and women, who scarcely know one another, to rest in each other's arms! That, to us Egyptians, heathenish as we may seem, seems both barbaric and bad taste, if you will pardon my saying so."

Caro felt the patriotism she would have said she did not possess, in connexion, at any rate, with arguments of trivial nature, rise in quick defence, then she checked her words; how absurd to quarrel over a dance! Her natural generosity made her say gently:

"This is a new way, we have never ridden here before, I think."

"No," Hamid answered shortly; he was not ashamed, but her graciousness stung him a little.

They rode on into the bewildering sunset, and suddenly his petulance vanished, he turned and looked at Caro and said, involuntarily under his breath:

"How beautiful you are."

It was a cry wrung from his soul, that soul which revelled in loveliness, which was influenced mainly by it, and felt for it, perhaps, its true religion.

Caro met his eyes and smiled, his remark did not offend, simply because it had been said almost unconsciously. She herself said, though lightly, destroying the nearness of the moment by that lightness:

"How young you are!"

Hamid coloured under those words, his whole face

softened, he looked a little diffident for once, less self-assured.

Then his complacency flew back to him.

"Women say that to men from tenderness, I think," he said.

Definitely he had struck a warning note, he had revealed a state of mind Caro had not believed possible, the men she knew assumed so little, this man began by a big assumption; it offended her.

But it was too late to go back now, and besides, she shrugged mental shoulders, by to-morrow all this would be over—

Secretly she knew she was glad, secretly she was longing to return to Cairo—and perhaps then she would go to Paris, Italy—meet Sforza.

One never knew!

It was now velvety dusk, and suddenly, out of the sand dunes it seemed, as if Hamid had possessed a magic ring, men and camels rose.

Above, the sky was of extraordinary violet colour, it looked like a bloom of unending violets flowering miraculously upon a fervent earth which, when the blossoms parted, showed through in ribbons of pale amber.

Hamid helped Caro into a palanquin, then got in himself; the camel stood up and moved off.

"A cigarette?" Hamid's voice said out of the warm darkness, he produced his cigarette-case and little patent gold lighter.

Caro said, looking at them:

"Rue de la Paix in the desert!"

"You, too, love contrast," Hamid murmured; the scent of his special cigarette perfumed the close, narrow space.

Caro pulled back a curtain and the violet sky seemed to flow in.

"What a wonderful night," she said.

Hamid echoed her words, he moved and his hand

touched Caro's, she drew hers away with a murmured apology, but she knew he had tried to touch her.

"I was stupid to come," she told herself in impatient self-condemnation.

However, it would be over soon.

The camel surged on, her position in this palanquin, housed like an Eastern woman, suddenly seemed ridiculous to Caro. She wished the expedition were finished.

"Surely," she ventured, "it is very late? Perhaps, after all, we had better give up the hope of seeing your wonderful camp——"

"We are near now," Hamid said quietly.

But the "nearness" did not seem to be very near, there was no sign of a camp, of any human being at all anywhere as far as Caro could see.

Only a great loneliness of space, grey-white, and, above, the brooding darkness of the sky.

She gave a little shiver of weariness, and instantly Hamid's hand closed on hers.

Caro could feel the pulse in his dry palm beating, beating against her own, in this small shut-in space it seemed to throb almost audibly.

She said, as naturally as she could:

"Ah, your hand is warm, I hope I have not caught cold, I feel rather as if I had."

"I will give you a cordial in my camp," Hamid answered, and his grasp seemed to tighten.

"I am sure it must be late," Caro began again. She attempted a *rechauffé* of the little joke: "If I am to be in to time—do you not think we had better turn home?"

"We are home," Hamid said, "at my home. See?"

Flares had sprung up in a second, the smell of smoke blew into the palanquin, the noise of voices, dogs, horses, all the confused impression a big, living place gives came to them.

The camel knelt, a dozen dark faces shone in the glare of torches as Hamid lifted Caro out.

Then she was led over a litter of ropes, through more throngs of gazing people and into a tent.

Even her nervous anger, the dread she had not been able to stifle, faded before the impression the vast white-ceilinged place gave.

It was stupendous, and it was beautiful, the walls of the tent were tapestry, the floor of it was covered with rugs which Caro knew must be priceless, there were couches and gorgeous cushions, a piano, and a table glittering with gold plate, and everywhere, in every corner, huge jars and vases of mimosa, palm, roses, scarlet geranium.

Hamid had vanished, a girl stepped into the tent and opened her hands in supplication before Caro, she led the way to a little inner room where there was water, a bowl of sheer crystal, every imaginable Parisian scent and powder, even lip salve!

A faintly satirical smile curved Caro's lips, she had known Hamid to be luxurious, she had, so far, acquitted him of effeminacy!

She made a very hasty toilet and went back to the vast circular room.

Hamid rose to greet her, he had changed into full native dress.

"To greet you, to give you the real impression," he told her, smiling into her eyes.

Caro smiled and thanked him, but his appearance, magnificent though it was, brought back that feeling of faint dread.

Resolutely she denied it. Of course, this was Hamid's very charming way of welcoming her in Eastern style—*eh bien!* why let herself be stupidly nervous? And what conceit on one's own part!

They sat down to dine, Hamid cross-legged upon a pile of cushions, a servant, immense, clad in white-and-scarlet, brought him the bowl to rinse his mouth and hands first.

Caro watched him, he was quite without self-consciousness, or he was so sublimely self-conscious he could do no wrong!

She thought of him at Oxford, at the Berkeley, rinsing his mouth, and then spitting the water into a golden bowl, which was presented to him by a servant kneeling!

"It is like an undecorative Arabian Nights tale," she told herself with chill amusement.

Yet she had to admit to herself, too, that in this native setting Hamid looked dignified; he might be, his table manners might be, undecorative, but he presided with a certain natural hauteur, which was not unimpressive.

The dinner was long, extremely good, and obviously prepared by a chef, and the wines, which Hamid did not touch, and Caro merely sipped, were, she recognized, of excellent vintage.

Then the servants lifted the table and bore it out of the tent.

Caro rose and strolled after them to the door; the night waited beyond, infinite, star-filled, coldly sweet. Caro stood, leaning one hand against the iron pole which formed a side of the door, looking out, and suddenly Hamid crossed and stood behind her.

"It must be late, we ought to ride back, I fear. It is wonderful, your camp," Caro began. She spoke quickly, a little disconnectedly, because she was nervous.

Hamid laughed gently; he leant above her and dropped down a portière of heavy tapestry which shut out the night, and shut them in alone.

"We are miles from any human beings save my servants, my followers," he said. "You are lost in the heart of the desert!"

She tried to laugh with him, but only her lips laughed. Behind Hamid's gentleness there seemed something sinister.

She went slowly forward and stood beneath the

carven silver hanging lamp, and made a valiant effort to stimulate her usual courtesy; she knew in that moment that she rallied her courage.

"I am afraid I must go now," she said, a little smile trembling on her face, held there by her will. "Perhaps you will be kind enough to send someone with me? It would be ridiculous—one would not expect you to turn out again so late."

She waited, and perhaps in that instant of waiting she knew.

At any rate, her mind said to her: "This is the twentieth century, you are an English woman, a type this pure-bred Arab, as he is, has met in England—your fears are idiotic—pull yourself together."

And while her mind spoke so, her instinct, every single intuition she possessed, reared itself back in terror.

Hamid was standing before a couch on which silver-tasselled cushions and a huge tiger skin were spread.

He turned his head and looked with extraordinary significance at her. In his glance there was one thing only, desire. It glittered in his eyes like blue flame, it showed about his mouth in two quivering lines.

He said very softly:

"You know you do not want to go! You talk, of course, as women always talk, and you do with your words just what you mean to do—you gild the event a little, and we both accept the gilding!"

He flung back his head and laughed, and his strong throat looked oddly dark between the dead-white folds of his turban.

"You women, how alike you are, East and West, with your silly little subtleties," he said.

He stepped forward until he was so close that had either of them moved they must have touched each other.

"Save for one thing," he went on. "In that you are supreme. I have never seen a woman like you,

Caro, nor has any woman ever driven me so mad. You are so tormentingly white, so intoxicatingly fair. I have looked and looked at you until a nausea of longing has made me faint, and I am strong. Feel——"

He took her hand and laid it above his heart, and it beat through in hammer blows.

Caro fought for words; they flashed like sparks into her mind and vanished as quickly, the most insanely inappropriate sayings drifted across the tempest of her brain. She tried to speak and found her lips dry, she moistened them and saw Hamid's eyes following her action, and laughing at it.

With a visible effort she said:

"I am your guest, Prince; I was your friend. I am entirely within your power, and I trusted you when I came with you. I must ask you now to give me an escort back to my villa."

She stopped speaking, and her hurried breathing was the only sound in the vast tent.

Then Hamid stooped and gathered her wholly into his arms, and carried her to the couch covered with the tiger skin, piled with silver cushions. He sat down, holding her crushed against him. She neither spoke nor cried, only her eyes looked up at him, holding a fathomless contempt. He smiled at her, bent and took her lips with passionate, terrible slowness; the kiss seemed unending, it was cruel in its intensity, its insatiable demand.

Caro could not move, her arms were pinioned by Hamid's savage clasp. She could feel his body pressed above her, pressed down on her as she lay across his knees, like a hot wall of steel, in which, thunderously, a power beat and beat.

At last the kiss ended. Hamid lifted his head, he looked down at her, his eyes dreamy now, his mouth smiling.

Caro put her released hand over her bruised lips, he moved it away.

"I must see them, those gates to my Paradise."

His right arm lay across her like a bar of iron.

Caro knew she could not move; she said almost inarticulately:

"I appeal"—she struggled with the tears which seemed to block her throat and hurt her as she breathed—"I appeal to your—to the memories of the days when we met in Paris—when I accepted your friendship as—as the friendship of any man I—I liked and trusted. I am defenceless, utterly at your mercy. I do not love you, I have never loved you. This outrage has humiliated me to the depths. You cannot, you cannot want a woman who despises you——"

"Ah! you despise me?" He was taking the pins from her hair with his free hand. The natural intimacy of the action, the contrast in its gentleness and its purpose, lit an anger in Caro she had never known it possible to feel.

"Despise you!" she said panting. "I loathe—I hate you! Every breath I draw, every pulse that beats in me, strengthens my contempt for you. You are my host here, you brought me here as your guest, you have accepted my hospitality, you had from me, and knew you had, the trust a woman unconsciously and always gives to a man she believes to be decent——"

"Decent?" Hamid echoed. His face was intensely amused. He pressed his hand suddenly on her head, drawing it nearer to himself so that it lay against his throat; his voice came low and passionate, and yet with that undercurrent of lazy amusement a woman detests because it expresses a man's pleasure at her inferiority.

"Decent? No, I am not. I am alive, natural, living each second of this night as a savage would live it! I prepare my feast of joy, I dally with its preparation! Ah, no, do not struggle, little, sweet,

helpless fool! No struggle will avail you, and I am in the mood for resistance. You talk of Paris and of friendship! You accuse me of so many hard things, so harshly! I forgive you. For I, too, remember Paris, our long hours in the wood when, if I had wanted, I might have kissed you! And that evening in the boat when you were quite quiescent! You speak of trust; I speak of *coquetterie!* You speak of defencelessness, I speak of the lack of need of defence for a woman, so young, so lovely, so desirable, who leaves her husband, travels alone, gives hours to men —oh, yes, innocent hours perhaps, in seeming, but in intention? Ah! you suppose *we* never think, or laugh inwardly, or see through? All women are alike, my Beautiful: they love the hunt and hate the capture, or think they must pretend they do! But you need not pretend with me. I know that beneath your anger another fire burns—and I will warm myself at it, however you protest! See"—he tilted her face back and smiled down at her—"see, I am not angry! I cannot be, no man could be, gazing at such loveliness——"

His face grew pale as he looked at her, his eyes lost their amusement; he shivered a little, and at that moment Caro sprang from his arms. In a second he had her and had placed her on the couch; he bent above her, and stooping, pressed her head back against the cushions, until, from sheer powerlessness to breathe, she nearly fainted.

He lifted his head and stood looking down on her. Slowly her eyes opened; they blazed upon him. She forced herself to rise, and, grasping the couch for support, faced him. Her free hand was against her heart. She moved her head as if in pain. Deep in her mind one senseless slogan rotated: "This is the twentieth century—such things do not happen." Confusedly, breathless, she said it aloud, then in a whisper added: "You cannot destroy every code, every standard."

He broke in in a whisper, his voice mocking her scathing scorn:

"Your little creeds, your codes, your shibboleths, which you English prate about, which you say guide you, and which you choose to imagine shall guide others because they happen to be a standard of breeding chosen by yourselves, and desire shall be saddled on every other human being, since, being English, it is the only standard possible! English! *You* dare despise *me* because I am no futile hypocrite, and do not foist a standard of honour on the world in order later to enforce my will more easily! Your codes, your honour! Honour which permits a woman to leave her husband, entertain any man, and still demand respect from him! A woman of our faith, our country, would be killed for less! Ah! I know what you are thinking behind that white mask of hatred. You are thinking I am an Arab, a native, and you are an Englishwoman, and so, of course, above me! I will show you just how human you are in my eyes to-night! Ah, that makes you quiver! I love your damnable temper! No, no, do not hope for escape; there is no exit from this camp save into the trackless desert. Yes, I am sure you long to say you would prefer that to my company! But in this moment *I* will speak. You accuse me of having betrayed my obligation as your host? *Touché* there: I admit it! But you were wrong: no man of my race admits an obligation to a woman who comes willingly with him. A woman who has let a man accompany her anywhere, unattended, such a woman in the eyes of such a man as I, has no standard. I betray no trust to you, for I gave none. Let us have done with this farce about trust and honour, obligation. You have loved to play with fire since first we met! You think I do not know? I tell you I do. Your vanity was pleased by my devotion. I have seen it in your eyes a thousand times. You took all the pleasure

of that, of my unexpressed adoration which you perfectly understood! You bought in the open market of men's admiration, now you refuse to foot your bill! That is all, is it not? That is the truth!"

His eyes had never left her face, it quivered now with the terrible weariness of this strain, and Hamid believed he had won. His own face changed marvellously, became tenderly exultant, transfigured. With a sudden sweeping movement he knelt before her, his arms about her, his face uplifted, on it an expression of sheer, wild adoration, the intense, passionate idolatry a man's face can wear once perhaps in all his life.

Despite her outraged repulsion, her real physical outwornness which made the tent seem to revolve about her, and cast before her eyes a flash of whirling columns, in this moment Caro felt for a second dispassionate admiration. Supreme worship lit Hamid's white face to supreme beauty.

Both were held spellbound in that strange moment.

Hamid's voice came, so low it was scarcely audible:

"My soul, my body, pray to you. All I have said is nothing—nothing—madness of anger—you despised me. . . . My real self speaks now to you. I worship you—my life goes out in worship to you. All these weeks I have lived remembering your face, the tones of your voice. . . . I will give you the splendours of life, put my hands beneath your feet to ease your path. . . . I love you as few men ever hear of love. The whiteness of your body is like a lamp within my soul — you are my heart's eternity——"

He stooped lower and kissed her feet. The touch of his lips through the thin suède of her riding boot was like flame. As in a mist she saw his upturned face again, and in her reeling thought his face seemed like the carven image of some dead god. . . .

She thought of the temple in the desert, but it was she who was his god . . . he had said so. . . .

"I am fainting," she said to herself, and swayed upon him.

She was in his arms again, that exultant, ravaged face bent to hers, and through her, all about her, it seemed, the pulse of Hamid beating, beating like the pulse of life itself, and that reiterate, silly, maddening sentence: "This is the twentieth century—such things do not happen!" . . .

Something hot burnt her lips and throat, and the tent became clear, and Hamid's eyes, no longer bitter, triumphant, conquering, but tender, infinitely humane. He looked so young now, too, so appealing; he was no longer a man to be afraid of, to despise; his madness had passed.

Caro smiled at him, and he smiled too.

"I can go now?" she whispered to him.

He did not speak, only his hand, resting beneath her head, tightened its hold.

"You—I—we understand," Caro went on, "now. Hamid——"

"Yes, what is it?"

She could tell nothing from his voice.

She struggled with her tears; passionately she willed herself not to cry.

Hamid said very low:

"One kiss—one you shall give me—yourself."

Her heart leapt in her side. She was not to go; it had been a baseless hope, but her brain worked clearly now: the wine Hamid had given her had steadied her nerves, and Hamid's sudden, amazing worship had shown her her power.

She smiled into his eyes.

"I cannot lift my head—you must help me."

He was all tenderness. He placed cushions for her, knelt beside her, and then suddenly he leant his head down on her breast. About her, overpoweringly, there rose the perfume she had liked that first

evening in the rose garden at the villa. Hamid's head pressed hard against her breast, his hand lay pressed against her throat; from beneath his robe his ankle showed, bare, slender, but its fine slenderness suggested strength somehow.

How should she escape?

Hamid lifted his head. He trembled from head to foot. His hand slid from her throat to her shoulder.

"Beautiful—loveliness," he stammered, "you are whiter than moonlight. I am mad, *mad* for you. Feel my heart—you must feel——"

He thrust her hand into his robe, and pressed it hard against his warm side, and she could feel his heart struggling like some lithe, imprisoned thing to escape.

The sense of his strength, his overpowering personality, terrified her.

She caught at his hand in both hers.

"Hamid—take me—carry me, if you like, to the door—let me breathe freely——"

He lifted her as if she had been a child and carried her to the door and out into the night.

The men were camped at a little distance; they were dancing and singing.

Caro thought, not one of them would help her, not one—to them she was an Englishwoman, bought perhaps by the Prince, under no circumstances a woman to be considered. . . . She slid from Hamid's arms and stood beside him, her eyes searching frantically for some sign, any sign, which might help her. Desperately she strove to talk naturally, to bring back naturalness to their intercourse, and yet whilst she talked hopelessness like a terrible drug made her feel she must break down, give way utterly, relinquish every effort.

A horse whinnied from the pickets.

"Ali hears my voice," Hamid said: he seemed pleased.

"Where is he?" Caro asked.

"To the left."

Quite naturally she turned in the darkness to where he spoke; quite naturally she waited on Hamid's answer to her question, "Shall we go and speak to him?"

He led the way, holding her hand; and as they walked together, talking of trivialities, the appalling power to *change* human nature possessed, struck her. How many men lived in this one man—how many women in herself? No one of them, it seemed, would be resourceful enough, clever enough, to contrive an escape—carry it out.

She would not let herself think of the night to be spent here: she felt, when her thoughts veered towards that possibility, as if a slow suffocation threatened her. That way powerlessness lay. She must keep her mind steady, every thought nailed to the present.

In the pickets the camp horses were ranged in lines, but Ali stood apart, and now he turned his beautiful shining eyes on his master in eager welcome.

"He is the swiftest horse in the desert," Hamid said proudly, and Caro thought: "On him I could escape; I could ride away at daybreak, and ride and ride . . . it would be an easier death."

They went back to the tent, and within its shelter Caro said:

"I am very tired."

Hamid drew aside the curtain which hid the door where all the powders and scents were. It fell behind her: she was alone.

She looked amongst the carved bowls, the satin boxes. A pair of carved gold scissors, tiny manicure toys, lay beside a powder puff tied with an amber bow. In the big tent Hamid moved, laughed. A voice answered him; their voices grew fainter. Caro stood listening, the scissors in her hand, and she

knew herself in that moment with relentless clearness. Some of Hamid's accusations, beliefs, had had reason. She shrugged her shoulders. Who had not vanity, did not give way to it at some time or another? She turned the scissors over. To lose everything—for a nothingness—a very desolation of despair possessed her. . . .

As a weapon either for herself or against herself these golden scissors seemed so cheaply futile—but they were all she had, or could find. She thrust them within her hair, drew aside the curtain and looked out.

Two men stood in the tent; one spoke, in English.

Caro gave a cry, and as she cried Hamid entered. His eyes leapt first to her, standing beneath the sweeping curtain of dull gold, then rested on the two men facing him.

In perfect English one of the Arabs said:

"I have a message to give Mrs. Cleveland, Excellency. I have come from Cairo to deliver it. It is essential she should receive it. I called at the villa to find her absent, and learnt from her maid she was dining with you."

Hamid said imperturbably:

"Not only dining."

Then after a second's pause he added as tranquilly:

"You see for yourself Madame Cleveland is quite at home!"

As he spoke he fired from the folds of his robe, and the man before him reeled, coughed, slid to the ground, and lay there doubled up, his head on Hamid's feet. The shot had been practically noiseless, a thing of infinite fraction of time, but before the smoke had cleared the second man had sprung on Hamid. His turban fell from him—Sforza looked at Caro across Hamid's shoulder.

He did not see her; he saw nothing in that

moment. He was conscious only that Hamid had killed his brother, and that at last they two were at grips.

Hamid's pistol had fallen. Sforza kicked it away. He would fight now with his hands, kill this man with his bare hands, which loved their task. No one had insulted him in his life save this Egyptian, and he had never fully avenged that insult. Now he had killed Robert. Sforza had two wrongs to repay. He had sprung like an animal on Hamid and wound himself about him, and the great shock had placed Hamid at a disadvantage, but now he had overcome that, and, in turn, his arms crept up, his hands seeking Sforza's throat.

They fought almost noiselessly; even their breathing was controlled in this struggle—too fierce, too tense for them to gasp.

Their faces were terrible; grey masks in which eyes burnt like living coals, lips back-drawn. As they swayed a bone broke in one of their bodies, audibly. Neither cried out.

Caro felt her own hand hurting. She looked stupidly for some scar on it. She had been holding the curtain so tightly it had cut her fingers; blood ran from them—it did not matter.

Over and over in her mind the sentence turned: "This is the twentieth century—such things do not happen."

Before her Sforza and Hamid rolled on the ground, fingers locked in each other's flesh, the sweat of agony pouring down their faces. She saw Sforza give a convulsive jerk. He rolled over uppermost after an interminable wait, and then, as slowly, with a last terrible effort which betrayed the nearness of that powerlessness sheer exhaustion entails, Hamid got astride him. He lifted his head then and looked at Caro. His face was livid, his mouth black in that staring mask, but his eyes smiled.

"Thou eternity of my heart," he said in a croak-

ing whisper. "Dost thou hear — dost thou hear? Soon—soon——"

Beneath him Sforza lifted himself, lifted the double weight clear of the floor, then collapsed, and, as he did so, struck upwards. Hamid, surprised, swayed, lost his hold. Sforza overpowered him, and knelt, not on him, but beside him, and choked the life out of him.

Blood bubbled and frothed on Hamid's lips. It had been his rib which had gone, and it had pierced his lung. Sforza's efforts would not have prevailed had he not been bleeding internally.

Suddenly the blood flowed like a cataract from his mouth.

"I am dying," he said clearly. Sforza reeled clear of him and lay utterly spent on his face. Hamid sat up, his eyes saw Caro; he lifted a wavering hand, and at last it brushed his face. He tried to sweep the disfiguring blood away. His blue eyes smiled when his swollen mouth could not.

"Thou loveliness," he whispered. His throat jerked, his head sank, he murmured in Arabic, then, slipping down, half turning, saw Sforza.

"Dog!" he whispered. He tried to strike at Sforza and failed, and, failing, died.

It was very still in the tent. Outside the tom-toms thudded monotonously, the hautboys rose shrill and blaring.

Sforza lifted himself at last.

He did not look at Caro but at Robert. He knelt above him, swaying as he knelt, and lifted Robert's head and cradled it against himself. Then he stood up and his eyes sought Caro.

"We must go," he said. "Come."

He added inconsequently: "Your husband died, you know."

Caro stared at him. She did not accept his statement. She thought his mind had lost all normal bearings.

He stood aside for her to pass out of the tent before him. Neither had any thought of being seen. It was as though they two moved in a world shut in.

Sforza touched her arm: "This way."

To the right Hamid's men feasted and sang. It was very late; the dawn was at hand.

An Arab holding two horses, sitting astride his own, was suddenly outlined against the sky.

In silence Sforza mounted Caro. He turned to his own horse.

Then he said dully:

"I must go back."

"No, no," Caro whispered. He did not seem to hear her. She slid from her horse and ran stumblingly after him, murmuring his name over and over:

"Giovanni—Giovanni."

He entered the tent and knelt beside Robert. His own eyes were closed; his face, above that other dark, young face, looked as still, as lifeless; his hand, clasping that other hand, as motionless.

Terrified, her eyes swerving, her heart writhing within her in this place of unspeakable horror, of dreadful death, Caro cried out.

And at that sound, Sforza lifted his head, his eyes listened, his face quickened; he laid Robert's hand back gently on his breast, and got upon his feet.

From a far door, a face looked in, withdrew.

Sforza went to Caro.

"Come," he said; she could not move; she could hear, see, she could not move.

"I cannot," she repeated earnestly, "I cannot, I cannot."

And her eyes, vacant yet glittering, rested on Hamid's body, his upturned face, the black froth of blood upon his carven lips.

"I can't go past—I can't," she stammered.

In the moment's following silence Sforza realized that the noise of the tom-toms and hautboys had

ceased, there was no noise now, only a stillness which was a menace.

Sforza moved, he caught hold of Caro, pulled her, lifted her at last with a visible shiver of pain, and walked stumblingly towards the door; as he reached it, passed out from the camp a clamour rose suddenly, ominous, vast.

"Caro," Sforza said sharply.

He made her stand on her feet and, supporting her, his face close to hers, he said:

"Here is my revolver—you must use it . . . you understand . . . we have no chance—Robert's servant has fled—we have no horses——"

The urgency of his voice; his last words stung Caro's mind back to momentary clearness of thought.

She said monotonously, like one repeating a lesson:

"To the left, Ali—Hamid's horse, the swiftest horse in the desert, pure-bred——"

"To the left," Sforza echoed.

As he spoke both became aware of a form, another, countless forms, converging upon them, only discernible because they made a darker blur against the darkness itself; and the blur, steady, relentless, came on without sound, like a tidal wave.

Then, like a storm, it broke with violent noise, with savage onslaught.

"*Now*," Sforza shouted; and swept Caro on towards the left, shots rained upon them, she heard Sforza call out, curse, he was on a horse, and he was pulling her up, the horse wheeled, fled, she could feel the ice-cold wind of dawn cutting her face, then her face was turned and rested on something warm, on Sforza's breast.

She could only feel now the racing horse; the warmth beneath her cheek.

Above, beyond, there stretched the horror of memories.

* * * * *

In keen sunshine Ali stumbled and broke his leg. Sforza was flung off; Caro lay where she fell, her hair across her face, one hand outflung, open, its palm scarred with half-circle wounds.

Curiously, Sforza noticed that, even whilst he drew his revolver; curiously, he thought of those small scarlet marks whilst he said a last word to poor Ali, whilst he covered the terrified, beautiful eyes with his free hand. The shot rang out in the vast stillness, Ali quivered once, and lay still.

Sforza rose, he stood above the dead horse, his tired blood-shot eyes staring into the desert which stretched endlessly before him, pale primrose fading to dun, to grey, to nothingness. . . .

He looked down at Caro: of what use to wake her?

. . . . Better to kneel beside her as he had knelt beside Ali. . . .

Yet that inscrutable and incredible tenacity of will to live, merely to live, made that act impossible; at the realization, life was challenged, life was at bay instantly; like an act of defiance or defence, Sforza swung round, his face whitened slowly, he said above his breath in a spent whisper, like a runner who is beaten: "It is a mirage."

His eyes clung to those shadows on the primrose vastness, his eyes told him of trees, a tent; he began to run, he ran zigzag, like a man who does not see, his hands out, his mouth open. . . .

He put his hands upon a tent, upon harsh, gritty stuff—it was real, and the well was real, and the tamarisk bushes. . . .

He had no fear, relief beyond comprehension almost, had blotted out all caution.

He went into the small tent, a mist of sand lay over everything; there was a robe hanging on a nail, a cake of soap beside a bowl, a towel flung down on the mattress on the floor, which was but a plank or two; there were blankets over the mattress, two

or three pillows, and in a big canvas bag, there were dates, coffee, flour and cognac, and some little cases of tabloid food, and chocolate——

A folding table had fallen over, Sforza righted it, something square lay beneath it, he picked that up, it was a photograph, his own face looked back at him in cardboard. He put up his hand to his head . . . two, no three years before, he had had that portrait taken in Dover Street—in London——

It had been a rainy day he remembered, and he had lunched Wingate at the club—the photographer had been dressed up in some way—a black satin smock . . . something like that . . . the photograph had been taken for Robert. . . .

"Robert," he said under his breath.

Before him, as if conjured by that word, he saw Robert, smiling, eager, gallant . . . he remembered . . . and he saw now Robert's still face, set in immobile peace; he could feel in that instant Robert's chill hand, the colder touch of their mother's ring which he had always worn. . . .

"This was Robert's tent once," Sforza said aloud.

He wandered about, vague thoughts thronging his exhausted mind . . . of course, yes, Robert had spoken often of halting places on the desert . . . lately he had lived in these rough shelters, whilst he had been investigating for the Government. . . .

Robert's tent—within this little, shut-in space he had moved and breathed, laughed—thought——

Across the opening slit something moved, blackness cut against the blue, it wheeled lower, crossed the slit again leisurely. Its passage struck like a sharp blow at the numbness of Sforza's mind . . . he walked uncertainly to the tent door and looked at the vulture . . . he remembered poor Ali, and near to his dead body, Caro. He started to run across the intervening space, in the intolerable heat, the bird rose higher, the heavy beat of its wings was still audible; Sforza raced, an insane anxiety driving him

on; he knelt beside Caro and strove to rouse her, amongst the weary jumble of ideas which filled his mind, one of danger from sun still recurred persistently.

"The sun," he said urgently, loudly, "the sun."

Caro opened vacant eyes upon his face, she seemed incapable of accepting any idea. He pulled her to her feet, and pointed to the tent, they went forward together, slowly, stumblingly.

In the shelter of the tent Caro turned and looked at Sforza, her face trembled, her lips shook piteously.

He said reassuringly, strongly:

"It is all right—you are safe—quite safe."

She repeated the words audibly. It seemed useless to try and talk with her, almost with despair Sforza said, pointing to the mattress:

"See, you can rest again."

She slid down obediently, her eyes closed instantly, she looked like a child who is tired out.

Sforza stood gazing at her; was she suffering from brain fever or were these the symptoms of utter exhaustion?

His own head ached abominably, every bone in his body seemed to ache too, and he thought with longing of hot water.

He turned away from Caro and began a new search of the tent, it yielded a copper pan, matches, methylated spirit, a bundle of thick rugs, several boxes of cartridges and another revolver. He gathered sticks and lit a fire and boiled water and made coffee, into which he put cognac; he carried a cup to Caro, waked her, and kneeling behind her to form a support, held the cup to her lips and made her drink it.

Her head rested on his shoulder, he had to keep one hand on her throat to steady her, his lips were buried in her hair.

He put her back when the cup was drained and let her sleep again, and stayed where he was, sitting native fashion whilst he drank his own coffee.

Very, very dimly he considered Caro; she was here, he was near to her. Far back in his mind he had a faint memory of some man who had felt time and space to be nothing, so only that they gave him, in return for his prodigality of them, his own woman.

The memory confused him, it was mingled inextricably with Robert's death, the moment before he had known the tent was near. . . .

He did not know what he felt, the events of the last hours had beaten his heart and brain to insensibility.

Consciously he was unconscious of any sensations, any definite thought, or want, save rest.

Outside the blue sky glittered; in the dimness of the tent Caro's face showed unearthly white save for that gorgeous, radiant colour just beneath her eyes. . . .

Sforza found a cushion, he did not trouble about a rug, he lay down near to Caro.

"It is days since I slept," he thought, and he seemed to be flashing through shining space towards a darkness which lay always just ahead. . . .

He waked to real darkness and to sharp cold, and sat up with a sudden movement which caused each strained muscle to be stabbed with pain, he stayed for a moment resting on his elbow, gathering strength to rise. His eyes, accustoming themselves to the darkness, saw Caro's mattress was vacant; he stumbled to his feet, his heart hammering suddenly, and called her name sharply.

At once, from the doorway, her answer came:

"I am here. I waked before it grew dark."

Sforza walked towards her, he still was dazed with sleep, and his thigh, which Hamid had bruised terribly, betrayed him suddenly; his knee "gave," and he would have fallen had not Caro caught his outflung hand, and, in order to give a man of Sforza's height balance, drawn his whole arm closely about herself, bracing herself to steady his weight. They

stood so closely together that from shoulder to foot they touched; Caro gave a little quivering sigh.

It went through Sforza like an electric shock, it gave him back the life he had seemed to lose, it was as though, through his veins, an elixir raced with furious triumph. There was no sound, it seemed, in all the world save Caro's faint breathing; there was, there never would be, Sforza knew, any "nearness" in the world, so maddeningly sweet as this . . . incoherently, he said within himself, the word expressing an exaltation which swept his brain and convictions into chaos: "Mine. *Mine.*"

In that second, with Caro held wholly in his clasp, his being conscious of hers, her very breath seeming to be breathed within his body too, so vividly did his every nerve respond to the faint movement of her breast against him, it seemed as if no communion could be closer, as if indeed she were his own.

Then, with the same insistent violence, there came to him the memory of the evening before, and passion died in him like flame engulfed in ice.

He freed Caro with a quick gesture, and supported himself against the taut canvas of the opening.

Now she was breathing more hurriedly and the sound still tormented him.

He said harshly:

"I have found coffee, and rice, and dates in the tent. It must be Robert's."

He stopped, Caro said nothing.

She could not have spoken in that instant. Sforza's embrace, if it lit a leaping fire within him, had drained her of every atom of strength; she had thrilled insanely to his touch, and his release of her which had been a repulse had stunned her—the transition had been too swift, too merciless.

Unconsciously, in the darkness, she put her hand above her heart and pressed it down hard.

Sforza went on woodenly:

"We may be here some time. The horse broke

his leg, poor devil; he was dead beat, and so was I, and with criminal carelessness I did not pick him up; I could scarcely see. When I first saw this tent I believed it to be a mirage."

"Yes," Caro murmured.

She could think of nothing to say, she had thought too much of all that happened whilst Sforza had been sleeping, now her memories held her dumb.

She had had no idea how they had come to the tent, what security they had attained; she had cared very little; she had seen Sforza was sleeping near to her, it had sufficed her. Looking out into the night she had felt the strangest mingling of emotions, the horror of the night before had numbed them, but they had been too vital to be wholly crushed . . . and, pitifully, she had striven to forget that night, to escape its aftermath of remorse.

With a fierce effort she had forced her thoughts away from Hamid, Sforza's presence beside her had helped her then.

Out of all the misery, the menace, the remorse, and pity, and horror one thing had shone out clearly: she had been glad Sforza was with her, she had even felt it would be possible to go to him when he should awaken, and say, "Forgive me."

Now such an attempt was impossible, nothing had been said to render it so, but a shade in Sforza's voice, a shade in his manner. . . . He had become far away suddenly, far away as only a man can be to a woman who loves him, and who has not told her love.

A cold unhappiness settled down on Caro, she turned from the quivering loveliness of the night back into the little tent.

"Is there—can we have a light?" she asked expressionlessly. "Or do you not think it would be safe?"

"Safe!" Sforza echoed, he gave a short laugh. "You and I are lost in the desert, we know no safety

and no danger, they are one to us; we can never hope to return if we are not discovered, and, if we are, the discoverer may be an enemy!"

Caro gave a hard little laugh too.

"You paint the future in radiantly cheerful colours, Marchese!"

He felt he had been brutal, and yet it had been a form of nervousness which had made him speak so. He could scarcely tell her he meant to kill her himself should the least danger arise, he felt suddenly choked with the bitter irony of the whole situation.

He said, speaking with an effort, in as normal a voice as he could manage:

"I am sorry, I am afraid I sounded unnecessarily depressing. Do you not think we might try to contrive a meal of some sort? We need one."

Action, even such trivial action as boiling water, making flour cakes, shredding dates, was a relief, a little of the tension vanished.

And once they laughed together over Sforza's costume, which, since he had discarded the burnous resembled that of a runner to the waist (he had retained his own silk vest when he had changed into native costume) and of the Turkish coffee-maker at a London restaurant from the waist downwards.

"I shall rig up a coat of sorts out of a rug," he said to Caro.

"Without needle and cotton?" she suggested.

Sforza opened his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"I had forgotten!"

To herself, with very feminine forethought indeed, Caro was thinking: "Thank Heaven I am in riding kit—it will last a good time!"

They "dined," sitting side by side on the mattress, eating with their fingers; when they had finished it was twelve o'clock by Caro's wrist-watch.

Neither knew quite what to say; finally, Sforza remarked:

"I shall take a couple of rugs and try to fasten them to the tent side, and so make my bedroom."

He got up as he spoke, and took two of the largest rugs from the bundle. Caro's last hairpins, which had been loose in her hair, formed the frail fastening, and then the rugs simply hung against the side of the tent.

"I shall creep in beneath them, and sleep so," Sforza explained.

He stood at the door of the tent; the fire had burnt out, it was quite dark, their faces were a faint blur to one another.

"You are not afraid?"

He kept his voice as guarded as possible.

"But of course not."

"Good night."

Something in his voice, which, for the life of her, Caro could not have explained, defined, stirred her again, almost uncontrollably.

"How can I? How can I?" she said to herself, when Sforza had gone and she was alone. "I, of all women, to feel so, to let myself feel so for a man who does not even think of me. Oh, it is this place, this amazing solitude. I will not let myself feel so—it is madness. I may be here alone with Giovanni for months——"

As she lay awake in the darkness she heard a faint movement; she sat up, rigid, listening, then realizing it was Sforza moving on his improvised bed, the blood rushed over all her body in a hot, sweet wave of feeling. Almost unconsciously she listened after that, to hear him move again, and when he did she felt again the same dizzying, vivid thrill. She sat up now and clasped her head with her hands.

"What am I going to do? What can I do—I love him. I am passionately in love with him. . . ."

Her hands slipped over her face, she felt utterly confused, ashamed of herself. Yesterday, before her eyes, two men had been killed—both indirectly—

because of her. To-night she was thinking of love, feeling love. Was she then wholly shameless, was she so light a woman she could live down so terrible a tragedy as this, live it down and feel passion for a man who had suffered in it, for her sake, so cruelly?

She lay back and hid her face in the pillow, pulling the coarse blanket up about her shrinking shoulders.

But she could not sleep, that stupor of exhaustion which had enfolded her for all those hours had rested her body, and now her brain could not find peace.

She was vividly conscious of every sound—of the rustle of the tamarisk bushes, of the sand silting up against the canvas, of her own breathing; thoughts raced, and halted, crushed one another, jostled and tumbled in her over-excited mind.

She thought of Hamid, of that hideous hour in his tent, of his abuse and adoration, his execration, and ecstasy, of that one last moment which she recalled as clearly as if before her she had an etching of the scene. She saw herself pulling aside the cloth-of-gold curtain, and meeting the gaze of Sforza and Robert, and at that moment Hamid's entry. There was the background of deep, pale purples, of gleaming scarlets, and the men's white figures cut sharply against it; Hamid's sneering, beautiful face, his excited eyes; the other two autocratic, almost frozenly controlled, and then the shot, and then Sforza's spring, the revelation of his identity as, with dark head backflung, he had wrestled with Hamid. . . . Hamid's dying words, "Thou eternity of my heart——" and then those two figures, still with an eternal stillness, and her own face pressed against the warmth of Sforza's breast. . . .

She shivered now. The night wind was blowing, and it seemed to touch her face with icy fingers. . . . How cold Giovanni must be—and perhaps he would not wish to come back into the tent to search for other

rugs? She had undressed and wrapped herself in the robe that had been hanging on the tent; it was of white wool, warm and soft; she had bound it about her waist with the suède strap she had worn with her riding clothes.

She got up, and felt about until she found two other rugs, and with those in her arms went out to Sforza.

His tent had fallen down, and now formed an extra cover for him. He lay, under the stars, sound asleep, the sand blowing into his thick hair.

Caro knelt beside him. She saw that if she lifted his head his face would be freed from the sand. Very gently she put a folded rug close to his head, and then bent over him and slid an arm beneath his neck. His face was pressed against her for the moment. Then she laid his head back on the rug and drew the other over him.

He looked curiously young asleep, young with that youth which makes so quick an appeal to a woman's maternity, and which she feels always in some part, for the man she loves, and strangely, which intensifies her other love for him, her possessive, passionate love . . . and now the enormous solitude, the utter, almost incredible loneliness in which they two were cast, gave added force to every longing, every feeling. Life here must be lived so closely, so really—no longer would the conventions, the small decorations of existence avail, here in the desert she and Sforza were two human beings cut off from humanity, two human beings apart, and yet enfolded in communion closer than any possible in ordinary life. The stars, the blinding sunshine, the endless sand, and they two together all day, each hour, without books, without music, without friends, without an echo from the outside world. . . .

She rose from her knees.

Was ever any woman placed in such a position? A desert romance with all the romance in one heart,

one body, one soul—her own! And month in, month out, she must meet Sforza, whose brother had been killed for her sake, who himself had suffered for her.

Who had found her in Hamid's tent at dawn!

She had fought that memory, striven to stifle it; it had proved too strong, it had conquered her resistance.

She made a little hopeless gesture. What good to wonder, hope, feel ashamed, anxious?

She looked back at Sforza. He had not stirred. Slowly she went into the tent and lay down again and tried to sleep.

CHAPTER XXIV

" Toute la vie, ardente et triste
Semble anéantie alentour,
Plus rien pour nous, plus rien n'existe
Qui l'amour."

—Sully Prudhomme.

Only the intimacy which a great mutual passion inevitably gives birth to, that intimacy which rejoices in itself, can make life, lived by two people in closest proximity, a natural, happy thing. It alone smooths down the exigencies of small, inopportune happenings, makes easy those inevitably tedious hours which come in every life; only that intimacy, which is response, sympathy, intuition, can give freedom of life, and consequent happiness.

Sforza and Caro had forced intimacy of all trivial things, every outward, essentially every-day side of marriage hemmed them in: they were each other's sole society, help, irritation, and apprehension. The daily round of the camp was fraught with minor, silly little difficulties, which might have been humorous could they have been closely shared; borne separately by two overwrought people they became magnified into tedious, yet maddening troubles.

Robert's halting-place had been meant to be used as such; beyond ample supplies of the most ordinary food, it proffered nothing, there was neither knife nor fork, nor mirror. There was not even a comb, save the small ornamental one which had miraculously withstood the buffeting of the ride, lodged in Caro's hair. Sforza and she shared it, and the golden scissors he used as a razor, contriving wonders with the help of boiling water, a piece of tin flattened out,

which had once contained rice, and the very sparse use of soap.

With tragic humour Caro thought once, studying Sforza's frowning intentness as he combed his hair outside the tent: "If he loved me it would all be absurdly sweet. I could comb his hair for him then—he makes such an appalling parting as it is!"

Her own hair she wore in a plait, clubbed on her neck; it made her look a little girl, and her thinness added to the illusion.

In a few weeks Sforza, too, grew visibly thinner; his manner was constrained to a point of abruptness; in reality, he masked a growing fierce unhappiness with a great effort.

The exercise he might have taken, the solitude he craved were both impossible benefits——

He dared walk only within sight of the tent; he feared to go beyond the dune which lay to the east, a couple of hundred yards distant, lest he should lose sight of the tent.

He did not consciously think of danger, actually, save in the first hour when he had discovered Robert's camp, he had never visioned danger coming out of the desert, rather this instinct in keeping near to Caro was one of primitive protection, unquestioned, scarcely recognized by himself; indeed, he had ceased now to think of a future which should be touched by any human beings, controlled by any human beings other than himself and Caro. All his thoughts had narrowed down to contemplation of their isolation, which was also their intimate nearness.

At first, reaction, both physical and mental, had held his mind quiescent, then, as his torn muscles, the flesh wound in his arm had healed, so little by little, but as irresistibly, as inexorably, as the sea, realization had flooded in on him.

The past weeks, with their burden of suspense, restrained longing, seemed now but pale and tepid memories; then, he had longed for the unattainable,

he had scarcely seen Caro, she had been another man's wife—they had been apart, he and she——

And now. . . .

Now she was before him, before his devouring eyes every daylight hour, and in the darkness, lit by the stars, her loveliness shone out with a white radiance, the rose and golden colouring might be gone, but even darkness could not hide the dark arch of her brow above eyes, the memory of whose green enchantment was as potent, almost, as actual vision of them . . . there was the line of her lips too, and the infinite lure of her voice, a lure which seemed even stronger in the soft purple shadows, when it seemed to call and call to his heart, and wring from it a wildly adoring reply, the more passionate because unspoken.

Yet sometimes in those very hours, when the sky hung tremulous with starry beauty above the weary earth, in those hours of darkness which make any relationship a simpler thing, and set a seal of clearer communion upon two people, paradoxically, at such times, Sforza would feel an ease from his longing, his bitter love; he would forget for a little, as they talked, or sat silent in the stealing lovely dusk, the almost insane jealousy of Hamid el Alim which shook him sometimes, which would overleap the iron barrier of his control, and with a savage rush sweep from him all tranquillity, all generosity of outlook.

Sometimes, instead of wearing thin the tension the darkness would soothe it, and Sforza would think that Caro and he were like disembodied lovers talking together.

But this mood seldom lasted; Caro would move, her voice would deepen or grow wistful, and its tones would play on him like wind on water; at once his peace was shattered, his blood and spirit would become again one frantic appeal to her.

Something of his need of her cleaved a way to

her, but she never thought now Sforza might love her—once, yes, but now——

If he suffered with the memory of that night in Hamid's tent, her suffering met his in intensity.

Yet she was less unhappy now than he; it was not that she demanded less, that she was less vivid, less in love, but he was there, near to her always, and her "other side," that tender, maternal love a woman must feel for a man, could express itself in a hundred ways.

He had to come to her for help in everything, and once Caro, contrasting her life before and now, smiled as she thought of how much sweetness civilization had robbed love; it had provided so much, that it had left tragically little for a woman to do for her man.

Times of quite spontaneous happiness would come like patches of divinely blue sky amongst grey clouds; there was the afternoon Sforza dug a bath with a plank for a spade: of course, he blistered his hands to pieces and, of course, the ground proved too porous; when both these facts could no longer be concealed he came to the door of the tent and looked for Caro.

She had been watching him, and with that intuition which can make married life what it should be, and frequently is not, had known the psychological moment to make coffee.

She came to Sforza with a clean towel and hot water and as soon as he had bathed his hands, brought him coffee.

He sat on the mattress looking up at her with outraged eyes in which, far down, humour lurked.

She longed to lift his head in her hands and cradle it against herself, and tease him back to amusement and good temper.

All she said was:

"You have worked magnificently, how tired you must be. I have made a sort of—of cake for supper—Look——"

Sforza looked, the humour in his eyes deepened, the coffee had been good too—if Caro could not cook she knew about coffee.

"Delicious, I should think," he said gravely, continuing to survey the greyish lump in which bits of dark date showed at infrequent intervals.

"I—I did not want you to do all the pioneering," Caro ventured; Sforza's head was bent, looking down at the forlorn cake, he lifted his face suddenly, and met Caro's eyes.

She looked such a girl, untouched—almost damnably innocent——

He got up. Untouched! He had remembered Hamid.

He walked from the tent without looking back.

It was still hot although it was nearly sunset, and he flung himself down at the foot of the dune, his eyes ached with weariness and lack of sleep.

At first he had slept superbly, of late he had scarcely slept at all.

He put his blistered hands over his eyes to shut out the glare.

How was it going to end?

He put his hands down and stared up suddenly into the brilliant sky upon which divine colours seemed to be whirling through a maze of glittering, yet soft, goldness.

There were moments, they came not unseldom now, when life itself seemed as void, as "beyond" him, as the sky into which he gazed.

All that he was, or knew, or thought, or felt, had centred in his love for Caro, every other thing, however deliberate, however trivial, had no longer any significance, all he could feel was longing to belong to her, to have a right to love her; all he could think was that she did not love him. He strove to reason, to fight down his obsession.

He sat up and gripped his knees with his hands. He told himself that this isolation, the influence

of the desert, an influence a man might deny, but which existed, was responsible for his weakness. A life such as the one fate had forced on him was lived by a man perhaps once in a century, and then of choice; he had had no choice. . . .

He knew well, had these same events, which were searing his life now, happened in freedom, when he had been free of action, that he would have suffered as damnably perhaps, but he would have had a chance of escape. He could have flung himself into work, forced upon himself other interests, broken his love, even if it had broken himself.

But here, in such loneliness that it was the closest companionship, there was no interest, seek how he might, by which he could escape: and it was a lie, he told himself fiercely, that the soul could control the body; perhaps in safe happiness, in a secure world in which temptation was, after all, but a matter of comparison, but here——

If he had a soul, he thought sometimes, it was as if it bled in agony. His honour ranked not as a quality, but as an instinct. Earlier he had found no need to curb himself; fastidiousness of honour had removed that need: it had, during those first months, kept Caro a being apart. She had been another man's wife, and later, directly he had learnt she might be free, that same inherent delicacy had placed her in that one other category which could command his soul's and body's respect—that of his wife.

A man of the world, a man who had lived largely in that world, his idealism was, of necessity, tempered by his knowledge. A woman did not go with a man to his home, were it tent or palace, unless she cared for him.

No idealistic reasoning, self-contempt, could save Sforza from the hideous suffering of that acceptance, nor from its continual suffering.

To love and suspect, to desire and despise, he

felt scorched by these flames, which rose and fell, rose and fell.

They were alone, he and she—as alone as few men and women ever were, or could be, and this space which was all about them, vast, encompassing, seemed to Sforza like his love for Caro which had made such emptiness of all other things in his life, leaving only space for love.

From the door of the tent Caro called, her voice came clear and frail, a very little cry out of the space.

Sforza went to her. He walked barefoot now, and already he moved with a new litheness; he was deeply tanned, and his eyes looked brilliantly clear in his dark face.

He walked through the sunset to Caro, his head and figure outlined against the sky, so clearly cut against the flame-like, livid blue that there was an effect almost of a scarlet edge to his form, the effect one's vision gives when too keen a contrast of light and darkness strikes it.

The dusk fell as they ate. There was a scent of burning wood and of coffee on the still air. The two palms which bordered their tiny oasis were sable silhouettes to guard them.

It seemed difficult to talk. Sforza was tired by his day, and his mood influenced Caro. The melancholy of weariness was on them both, and, too, a suspense which, though only half conscious, rarely left them.

Abruptly Sforza said:

"I think I shall turn in now."

He held out his hand to help Caro to rise, and he wondered grimly, as their palms touched, how it was possible that one human being should feel as he felt and yet no knowledge of the feeling reach the other.

And then, extraordinarily, he believed for a second that Caro's hand quivered in his clasp. His hold tightened without his volition as his pent-up passion felt that flicker of response.

For one instant he was close to Caro. For an instant, without kissing her, he felt the tremulous ecstasy of touching her lips with his own. His soul cried again as it had cried the first night: "*Mine—mine.*"

Caro moved slightly; had Sforza but known it, she swayed because his touch had thrilled her so, but the slight movement seemed to Sforza one of release. He freed her instantly, and she had no voice with which to answer his curt "Good night."

She went into the tent and lay down on her bed, and listened for Sforza to wrap himself in his rugs.

All her body felt icily cold now; her inmost being felt cold. How had it been possible for her to thrill so madly at Sforza's touch and he not know, feel nothing?

Men had always loved her, been endlessly good and sweet with her, and this one man whom she loved, as she knew now, knew well, with real love, the only real love she had ever known, could live in this isolation with her, be with her hourly, never be far apart from her, and yet feel for her nothing! . . .

And yet—and yet . . . in that heavenly, happy summer so long ago, he had nearly loved her, she knew, and she knew why he had not quite loved her. Then it had been because of Hamid el Alim, and it was because of Hamid el Alim Sforza did not care for her now.

What could she do? Say to him: "I was not el Alim's mistress? You must believe me in spite of having found me in his tent——"

How insane! No, worse—ridiculous! One did not say such things; it was impossible.

Whatever Sforza believed, he must continue to believe it.

She had had no chance to touch, however lightly, on her desert life before his advent, before the terrible

evening of Robert's death. As briefly as possible he had given her the Tempests' message. She had received it: neither had discussed it. Sforza had told her Robert's men had provided an escort for her maid to Cairo. "Poor Saria," she had murmured.

The past seemed so unreal now—all people in it—when even the present lacked reality. Sometimes, on waking, she would find it impossible to believe the truth was true, that she was here, exiled in the desert, cut out, perhaps for ever, from the outside world. Sometimes she longed to break down, give way to the hysteria which threatened her: her pride forbade her. If it were bad for her, it was equally bad for Sforza, who had lost, for a nothingness, his career, his whole world — a man's world, which counted so much more than a woman's.

Until she had loved Sforza she had never troubled to think with distinctiveness about a man's life—men existed to look after women, please them, protect them. She had never felt one throb of ambition for John; but now, for Sforza, she felt a poignant regret that he should be deprived of the power to work, to take his place in the world.

It was as if herself counted so very little now. She did not know that only with great love is humility born; that no lesser love can bring it forth.

There was a wind in the desert to-night: that burning, iron-blueness of the sky had presaged it. It shook the tent.

Outside it added to the restiveness in Sforza's blood. He stood up, loosening his rugs, then letting them fall.

He thought of books, of music he had heard, of his home, of Paris, of Venice. He conjured up mind-pictures of streets thronged with people, of dim cathedrals where the music soared towards invisible heights, of dinner tables at which he had sat, of men and women he had liked and known . . . these,

like flotsam and jetsam, tossed about one real thought: Caro.

* * * * *

Perhaps it was the wind, perhaps just a casual chill, but in the morning Caro was ill. Her throat was sore, her head ached badly; she spoke to Sforza in a whisper, attempting a smile. He made the coffee and took a cup to her; he tidied the tent. He was very tender, infinitely kind. Towards evening Caro's throat grew worse. She lay very still, her eyes shut, her lips set in pain. The tent was close; it was impossible to roll it up because then there was a keen draught.

"I will carry you out into the sunshine," Sforza said, and stooped and lifted her.

Caro lay in his arms, her face turned away from him. Beneath her own side she could feel his heart beating. Tears of sheer weariness, of longing, filled her eyes and rolled down her face. Sforza felt her quivering. He looked and saw her tears. His heart contracted. For whom was she crying?

"What is it?" he asked, his voice hard, because he feared it might express too much. "Are you worse? Your throat——?"

Caro gave a broken little laugh.

"No, no, no—it is nothing. I am tired, I think. I must be heavy. Please—please take me in."

Without another word Sforza carried her back. He left her soon and sat outside the tent. She could just see his hand, long fingered, virile, tanned, lying in the sand. Oh, to be able to twine her fingers in his, press her palm hard on his, love and be loved again!

"If I die here—if I should, would he love me first—if I asked him, told him?" she wondered miserably; and then her other worldly self mocked her with gentle irony: "Die of a sore throat . . . for love!" . . .

"I wish I could," poor Caro sobbed below her breath.

Sforza's voice came from without:

"Did you call?"

"No. But I feel horribly lonely. Giovanni——"

Deliberately she said his name, though until now neither had used any name.

There was an instant's pause, then Sforza answered:

"Shall I come in and sit with you?"

"Ah, do."

His figure shut out the light for a moment, then he was beside her.

In the gathering twilight Caro looked up into his face.

"Read to me!" she said.

"What shall I read?" he asked gently, without mockery, his mood interpreting hers.

With a little, shaken laugh Caro said:

"A poem—a love poem!"

With bitter irony at her words there leapt into Sforza's mind some lines from the *"Divina Commedia."* He had appreciated their austere pungency often: he had never believed that he might read into them a closer meaning for himself.

In a half murmur he said then in English:

"'Yea, thou shalt learn how salt his food who fares
Upon another's bread—how steep his path
Who treadeth up and down another's stairs'!"

"I cannot hear," Caro whispered. "Is it Dante?"

"A disciple of Dante's," Sforza said. "You know this?"

He was gazing down at her; their eyes met and clung.

He began in a low voice, his glance holding hers in a way which made her feel as if his mind dived into hers too, as deeply, as piercingly:

"'I looked and saw your eyes
In the shadow of your hair,
As a traveller sees the stream
In the shadow of the wood;
And I said, "my faint heart sighs,"
Ah me! to linger there,
To drink deep and to dream,
In such sweet solitude.'"

"I am carried back to the days of hero-worship," Caro said, "to the days when Rossetti was a god apart. Go on, Giovanni—I have always loved this poem—go on."

It was her eyes now which clung, seemed to demand. Sforza's voice was not steady any longer:

"'I looked and saw your heart
In the shadow of your eyes,
As a seeker sees the gold
In the shadow of the stream;
And I said, "Ah me! what act
Should win the immortal prize
Whose want must make life cold
And Heaven a hollow dream!"'"

There was a little silence, then Caro said dreamily:

"Did you ever get a certain edition of Rossetti's, in dark green, very dark, stamped with little golden stars to mark the number of the volume?"

"Yes, I bought it at Brentano's one year."

"Oh, there!" She sounded like a disappointed child because their books had come from a different place. "I got mine in Bond Street." Suddenly she leant up and twined her hands about his arm.

"Ah, Giovanni, please—please." She could not go on speaking; she was shaking so the words would not come. Sforza believed she had a fever. He became again all gentleness, consideration, and he soothed her as one would a child. Caro recognized instantly the change in his mood, and a despairing

bitterness swept into her. Was there no appeal which could reach him?

To-night she felt that to be kissed once by him she would give anything; and he said calmly, with deadening kindliness:

"You are overwrought, tired out, and therefore you feel lonely, depressed. You must not be. I am certain, as certain as I am of my own name, that a caravan will pass near us soon. Robert chose this as a permanent halting-place—that is evidenced by the store of food, which is out of all proportion to a casual need. No, this was a camp he used fairly frequently. It lies on a desert route. Sooner or later we shall be rescued."

"You are very convincing," Caro said. "Tell me, do you not long for the hour of delivery?"

Her voice puzzled him—it sounded at once cold and yet angry, almost bitter. He said slowly:

"It will be rather amazing, interesting, I imagine, to return to civilization."

Caro gave a little laugh. That tempest of groundless resentment which only rises when love is unintentionally hurt, and which always expresses itself with unconscious violence by hitting out indiscriminately in the hope of returning pain for pain, made her say recklessly:

"What a relief it will be for you to be free."

"Free?" Sforza echoed. Caro was sitting up; her lovely, flushed face was close to his own; he could see the rise and fall of her breast.

"*Free,*" he repeated.

"From me; from this appalling companionship, this closeness!"

She laid her hands suddenly on his chest, pressing them down hard on him. She was laughing still.

"Free from a woman who begs to be talked to, begs you to say poetry for her, requires you to do everything for her; a woman who is nothing to you —nothing——"

In her voice, her words, in the touch of her hands, there was love, repressed, resentful, hurt, and yet love pleading pitifully. Sforza felt mad for her, with her, at himself. Both were overwrought to the pitch of exhaustion, to that point when clear thinking is impossible, when every fragmentary sentence has a value utterly out of proportion to its meaning, when each chance look, the vibration of the voice, is exaggerated into a reproach, some expression meant to wound, because two lovers are as near hate as love through sheer unhappiness.

Only one thing can heal the fevered wounds caused by the reckless bitterness of this mood of exhaustion: no words, no explanation, no patience, no gentleness will avail, but one touch, the upward leaning of one lover to another, the meeting of their lips, will efface, in one trembling, desperately sweet kiss, all memory of pain and fear.

Without realizing she did so, Caro lifted her head; her eyes said to Sforza's lips what her own lips, aching for his kisses, could not say.

He felt her look. His face paled slowly. It seemed to him that Caro must hear his heart beating, that she must hear, too, the wild thrill which sang through him. That sweeping exaltation which gives lover to lover, bids love take unhesitatingly, encompassed him. He thought now, as the dying think, the fainting: thought came to him from far, far away, fragmentary, etherealized. In this moment nothing was wholly real; all was mystic. He thought of Caro's lips, of their mingled kiss when his lips should part hers . . . he had thought so often of that kiss, "looked" it in secret upon her lips . . . his quivering hands rose to clasp her, to draw her all to him . . . she slid back on to her pillows.

"I am so tired, so tired," she whispered tonelessly.

Sforza did not move. Upon him there descended the appalling apathy of a forced reaction which

seemed to sweep the power of feeling wholly from the body, leaving only a shell of personality, vapid, tired, utterly apathetic. . . .

He had been keyed up in that instant to sheerest, wildest adoration, to that love in which the love of the body and the love of the spirit mingle inextricably, when the one must express the other. It had not seemed possible this mystic passion should stream out to Caro and she not feel it, know it, return it. . . . She had turned away, unaware, "tired"!

The tenderness, which was so strong a part of Sforza's normal nature, failed him now; he felt a sort of dull, savage hurtness which ached in his heart, and, too, in his body. It was as if he had offered his best, not to find it refused, but ignored; a refusal would have aroused him, it would have been, to his mood, a generous thing in contrast to this pale inertia, this subjugation to a petulant weariness.

He rose, his self-control came back to him like an armour, with it there returned his genuine generosity, the gentleness of his innate courtesy to all women.

He said quietly:

"I will make you some coffee, and I believe I could use that box, the tin one, for hot water, if you kept it upright. I do not think there would be any fear of leakage."

"You are too good," Caro answered, and again unmistakable, biting resentment was in her voice.

She had utterly misunderstood Sforza's silence, his raptness of ecstasy she had believed to be lack of response, her courage had carried her gaze to his lips, had it carried her kiss all would have been changed.

In silence Sforza brewed coffee, filled the tin date-box, brought it to her, laid it against her feet.

And suddenly Caro felt like a very naughty child, she longed to anger him, rouse him in some way, any way.

She said perversely, out of sheer, wanton ill-humour, utter weariness of illness, of herself and him:

"The force of contrasts hits one rather painfully when one remembers Hamid's tent—and looks at ours!"

It was a remark in execrable taste, a remark of such ill-breeding made to such a man, that, had she been even a little less overwrought, Caro would have deemed it impossible for any woman to have made it. Now she herself said it, had delighted to say it.

Sforza had been leaning against the door, he turned like a flash and then stood motionless, he could scarcely bring himself to believe Caro capable of saying such a thing, of introducing, deliberately, the name of this man who had killed Robert; his whole being felt congealed in icy resentment, anger.

From the mattress—out of the soft darkness Caro's beautiful voice drawled.

"Do you not think so?"

Sforza mastered himself with a great effort, he had, below his rather impenetrable manner, a temper which at times was almost demoniacal. He had kept it under always, forced domination over it. Once it had swung him clear of all reason, after the card quarrel with Hamid, now it threatened to do so again; he was inarticulate, but words fought for utterance.

Some intuition of his suffering, his terrible bitterness, reached Caro, she rose and walked to him unsteadily, and as she drew near to him she felt as if every atom of life in her were failing her.

Desperately, in a very low voice, she managed to say:

"Giovanni, forgive me—it was unforgivable—I don't know what to say—what is the matter, but I—I——"

Her hands, outflung, touched him, clasped him, quite naturally she went to him and wound her arms about him, and laid her head down on his shoulder.

In Sforza's brain the name of Hamid hammered and hammered; his mouth was as dry as chalk, he could not speak now, whatever he wished to say; he hesitated a moment, then gathered Caro up and carried her, like a child, back to her bed and laid her down. Then, without attempting to speak, he went out into the night.

CHAPTER XXV

"Only of thee and me, till all shall fade;
Only of us the whole world's thoughts can be—
For we are Love, and God Himself is made
Only of thee and me."

—Louis Untermeyer.

In the morning Caro was better; she and Sforza met as if the night before had never been, they walked for a time, cooked such food as they had, both were constrained, neither conversational.

And both, curiously—or perhaps not curiously, since in life such as theirs, of necessity, thought-transference became a fairly simple thing at moments—both thought of Hamid el Alim.

The day wore on, it sped, in its dazzling circle, to its appointed end, and the night fell, cool, refreshing and, to Sforza and Caro, stirring, disturbing.

It seemed to Caro as if, with the coming of night, Sforza changed, became another being, subtly unapproachable, different.

They sat outside, talking at intervals; above them a sky like a purple clematis brooded, there were few stars, but now and then a tongue of crested green and blue fire quivered out, was withdrawn.

"There will be a storm," Sforza said restlessly.

"I do not mind," Caro answered. She felt she would welcome danger to-night, anything which brought change, forgetfulness.

Suddenly, for no special reason, they talked of Paris; their talk slipped, as lovers' talk always does, back to their own meeting—the words "do you remember" came often, they laughed together naturally for the first time when Caro spoke of the foie-gras, the patron's pontifical blessing on it.

But Hamid el Alim had been there too.

At last, driven by an impulse she could not explain, Caro said:

"I met Prince el Alim in Paris first."

Sforza answered nothing; she had to go on alone, a hidden, inscrutable purpose seemed to urge her on, give her secret bravery.

Yet her words were very banal.

"What—what mistakes one makes through vanity."

Sforza still did not speak, and Caro, after a brief pause, went on steadfastly:

"I did. I mean I—I—it wasn't, I think, that I encouraged Hamid el Alim exactly, but I did not discourage him. He filled an empty space for a little while. I sometimes think that one pays out of all proportion for the crime of letting oneself drift, perhaps because one has been hurt, because one has been lonely. We all do it, but few of us pay as terribly—as terribly as I have had to pay—as I have through my own reckless selfishness, the indulgence of my vanity, made others pay as well——"

Her voice sank pitifully.

Sforza said, speaking stiffly, stiltedly, because he was so moved, so intensely, painfully absorbed:

"You must not distress yourself."

Caro gave a little laugh, which held mockery and tears.

"I am afraid that is useless advice; one can scarcely avoid 'distress,' when one knows one ought to pay in larger coin all one's life! That one will have to pay, should do so."

There was a silence, she broke it by saying:

"My visit to the desert was made out of pique—I liked to call it heart-sickness, but it was, honestly, vanity sickness. My husband had told me he was in love with a girl and longed to marry her. I had long ceased to feel devotion for him; I should have been glad, it meant my release; I felt oddly resentful

and terribly lonely! He urged me not to go to the Villa Zohra, we quarrelled, and that made me determined to go. You begged me not to, and I had felt hurt with you because you had left Paris without troubling to say good-bye to me. I seemed to matter so extraordinarily little, and to matter to someone means everything to a woman at certain crises in her life. I didn't matter—save, perhaps, to Hamid el Alim. He applied balm to the vanity wounds, you see! His interest, his desire was to please me. And once I was in the desert, it fascinated me, lulled me, for a little while. I had meant to return the day after my visit to Hamid's camp; that was an expedition arranged on the spur of the moment."

Her voice trailed off; after all, Sforza did not care to know, he said nothing, he offered no least help, her bravery ebbed away, she became hesitant again, and dreadfully aware of her self, self-conscious, because she had spoken so and forced a long confidence on Sforza.

Then he spoke suddenly, in a voice which sounded queer, a voice she could not "place" with regard to the expression it conveyed, the mood it portrayed.

"Do you mean you went with el Alim to his camp against your will?"

"No. But I did not go because I wanted to specially—it—it filled in the time——"

"If Robert and I had not come that night?" His voice was still withheld, but into it there had crept fervour.

Caro summoned all her fleeing courage, she said in a half-whisper:

"I should have killed myself—somehow."

She heard Sforza give a quick gasp, he knelt up, he seemed to tower above her, his voice came sharp, breathless.

"*Why?*"

The words choked in Caro's throat, she struggled with them, they came brokenly:

"Do you not know—you must . . . I did not love Hamid . . . I had never loved him. . . . What sort of a woman do you think I am? . . . I would have died rather—rather than be Hamid's—those silly little scissors . . . they were all I had—I meant to use them—on my throat—in my heart . . . somehow, some way . . . do you think I could have been possessed by any other man, loving you——"

She had said it uncontrollably, before she could stop herself.

Sforza repeated dazedly: "Loving *me?*"

And Caro said, the words driven out of her now, herself helpless before her love, which shook and broke her: "Yes, you, you—you—ever since we met, I think—ever since Paris—and that night in Cairo when you were hurt. Oh, you can hear it now. Whatever you feel it is true—I love you—and only you—and I love you as I have never loved, as I never knew I could love."

She, too, knelt up, and her arms went round him.

"Kiss me—kiss me. I may be shameless, I do not care; I love you, and we two are here alone——"

Sforza drew her up, they stood together, locked closely, passionately to one another.

As one hears music in a dream, so Caro heard her own thought: "He will kiss me now."

Sforza bent his head, gently, inexorably, with a passion which drew and drew them one to another, he kissed her mouth, a thrill which seemed half divine, too vivid for actual life ran through them both; it was like a wild, mystic flame in their veins. Caro felt Sforza's hand touch her throat timorously, she pressed it closer, deeper.

"Hold my heart in your hand, my heart," she whispered.

His lips said the words which had burnt with him so long: "Mine. *Mine.*"

"All yours," Caro whispered back, "utterly yours, to do with as you choose—now and for ever."

He released her suddenly and stood a little way off from her, he said very low, not quite steadily :

"We are both free, you and I; in our world I should have sought you in marriage. This hour is consecrate, all my life it will be the holiest memory, the greatest, the most wonderful——"

He took her hand and lifted it, and placed on her marriage finger his signet ring.

Caro went close to him, he put one arm about her very gently, and she leant her head down on his breast, his voice came to her, very steadfast, very low and gentle :

"With all that I am, and have, all that I ever have, I bind myself to you. I swear to serve you with my life, protect you with my love, keep you till death shall part us, my wife before God and man."

He lifted her ringed finger to his lips and kissed it. They stood together, yet apart; between them, like a tangible and beautiful thing, the awe and rapture of the moment. Neither spoke, there was no room for words, words had ceased to have meaning just for a little while.

At last, in a whisper, Sforza said : "*Io t' amo, io t' amo, mia moglie*——" and then he said, his other hand seeking hers : "Our wedding-night."

To both of them there came no sense of strangeness, rather it was as if the desert blessed them; as if the night, vast and wonderful, offered itself to them as a bridal chamber.

To both this marriage, with the stars and night-wind as witness, seemed utterly real; they had grown so used now to the solitude and space that they had become friendly things, real, quick with life.

Perhaps, in that moment, they realized dimly theirs was the solitude for which lovers crave, that which they never have; but here it offered itself as a marriage gift, here they could love as limitlessly as the desert, here mysticism was theirs, that mys-

ticism it is impossible to know in civilization, because there, however believing, however longing love may be, it must inevitably come as a forced procedure, not as a descending miracle.

No thought of any other life came to either of them, the desert had given them each other, their lives dated from that desert birth.

Unconsciously, as Sforza moved slightly, Caro put out a hand to steady herself against the tent.

Sforza drew it down, held her all to himself pressed against him.

"Not to-night," he said almost fiercely, "to-night, your hands must touch only me, I am jealous even of material things you touch to-night."

His words, their significance, made Caro aflame for him again, she had been thinking of their marriage service, of his chivalry, and generosity; now she ceased to try and think—she, too, longed only to feel.

"There is only you, your touch, your lips for me to-night, for ever," she said; "for you, there is always, all of me you want——"

He took her lips in a caress that almost stifled her, and perhaps then, first, she realized the wonder of his passion for her, its intensity.

And she knew she loved that intensity, even if it hurt her, as it had hurt her lips, she loved it.

She had the strangest, wildest desire to whisper:

"Hurt me—my darling, my love, I do not care."

For the first time in her whole life she knew the joy of giving love, love was no longer a thing to take, its wonder lay in giving, in feeling the divine delight of love which accepted. She put up a hand and drew Sforza's face closer, it was cool and hard, only his lips burnt.

"Caro, Caro," he whispered over and over, saying it against her own lips, between them.

Everything in her seemed to break up, to long to melt into Sforza.

He released her hair with a gentle touch and it flowed about both their faces, a silken, living, warm, human veil, hiding their kisses even from the night. Sforza wound one of the soft curling strands about his throat.

"To have the right to do it——" he murmured, "to know I can—that you will let me——"

"Oh, my darling," she said to him, tenderness for him ached in her at that moment, she drew down his head until it rested on her breast, she felt him quiver from head to foot, and his thrill of passion entered into her as well.

Sforza slid to his knees, he lifted his head, and then pressed his lips to the soft whiteness; the kiss seemed to go through and through Caro, she knew then that everything in her, all she would ever be, or could ever feel, every ideal she had ever had, or would have, every dream, every need, every want, loved Sforza : his whispered ' possessive ' "Mine"— echoed in her soul.

"Giovanni," she whispered.

He looked up at her, his transfigured face gazed into hers.

She, too, slid to her knees and drew him closer, closer still.

"Mine, mine," she said, her lips lost in his.

CHAPTER XXVI

" 'Love dies to live!' How wild, how deep the joy
That knows no death can e'er destroy
What cannot bear destruction! By these eyes
I know that, e'er the fashioning of the skies,
Or ever the sun and moon and stars were made
I loved you. Sweet, I am no more afraid."

—Alfred Noyes.

"And they lived happy ever after!" Caro said one day.

She looked at Sforza drawing water, and he felt her look, and turned and smiled.

"There's one thing," he said boyishly, "being happy ever after keeps one magnificently fit! I've never been so strong in my life. Look"—he held out the pail of water at the full stretch of his arm—"I could play bat and ball with it, if the water would only stay in!"

He came to her to show her his muscle with the divinely absurd gravity every nice man displays over a matter of such importance. Caro felt the responsibility of the moment: she, too, gave due solemnity to this interest as she ran a finger over the apparently cast-iron bump on Sforza's arm which he called a "muscle."

He swung her up close to him.

"I adore you with every breath of my body," he said, put her down, took his pail, and continued his work.

Caro was struck anew watching him, his absorption in all he did, thinking over the intensity of his love-making, by a peculiar sweetness of temperament which seemed to be his, an eternal youngness of soul which kept his generosity, his power to give, so amazingly vivid, and limitless; he seemed to have no

smallness, and yet he had no disconcerting heroism, that sterling worth which so often paralyses other less, but far happier, qualities and is able to make a life lived *à deux* a very top-lofty and uncomfortable thing indeed!

Giovanni made life a splendour, a game, and a passionate reality.

He said to Caro, lying at her feet:

"Thank God, I never loved till now—when one *knows*, when life has had time to show what it is without love, so that it may show you when you *do* love, what love can make it."

"My darling, don't," Caro said.

He knew her thought, instantly he was beside her, telling her against her lips that she had known only real love for him, and in her own mind Caro said over and over again: "If I had waited—yet how could I know?"

"I have no memories," she told him truthfully; "you have burnt away every thought of any love save yours."

Sforza said slowly:

"Every lover has said 'No one has loved as I,' let us hope each believed it! But we"—he leant his cheek to hers—"we can say, 'No one has loved as we do.' We are here, you and I, shut off from every stimulus, every spurious aid the world offers to lovers—and which they grasp at, fearing reaction—staving it off—we have just ourselves and love, and if we did not care as we do, our life here would be unbearable, terrible. It is a glory. It is as if we were meant to love in the desert, it gave us to each other—till death."

"For ever," Caro said dreamily.

A look dawned in Sforza's eyes, died; he had discovered a few hours earlier that their well was running dry; for a moment he had felt as if a man had struck him above the heart, he had gasped for breath, nearly fainted—for one second now, he had

feared Caro knew, then he had realized his fear had been chimerical.

Suddenly he put his arms about her strongly, she felt so slight a thing within his grasp, and yet she was his world; he felt in that instant that they could not die, they, whose rapture reached the stars, whose content was in itself a splendour; it was as if death could not touch them, they themselves were life, it was impossible to think of Caro, sunlit in soul and body, dead, at still peace, here in the sand. . . .

"Giovanni"—her voice reached him and made him start—"of what are you thinking?"

"That you have the sweetest eyes ever seen," Sforza answered promptly—his mind might deal with life and death, his chivalry remained diplomatic—"and the greenest," he added, kissing first one and then the other, "and the most provocative and the most innocent!"

"All that, at one and the same time?"

"Oh, more besides," Sforza assured her airily, "the eyes of a baby and a Circe——"

She had forgotten, he saw, that she had meant to ask him why he had looked so grave.

A flare of inextinguishable revolt rose in him as he faced the future.

For the first time that night, when Caro slept, he relighted the fire, piling it up so that it would blaze high.

The wind had risen, it blew with a roar as if it raced rejoicing over the huge space, the two palms bowed and sobbed before it. The volume of sound, the great sense of power the wind gave, of intense movement, stirred Sforza wildly.

He lifted his face so that the wind struck it with full force. His heart said: "My God—I have lived!" and because he had loved so utterly, possessed so fully, he rebelled the more against the ruthless menace of death.

He would shoot Caro, then himself, in the sun-

shine, under that heedless, shining sky. They would go out together in the desert.

He turned abruptly and entered the tent; the moonlight shone in through the open flap, it fell in one white shaft across Caro's face, her loosened hair, which Sforza had loosened because he loved to feel it against him when he held her in his arms.

He knelt, looking at her, and that fierce cry of possession shook him again. "*Mine*—Mine——"

Yet never his enough.

He had to feel her close again, her peace, her apartness; the unconsciousness of himself sleep gave to her hurt him. They had so little time. He lifted Caro right up into his arms, and she opened her eyes and smiled, slid a close arm about his neck, murmured the words they had given to each other, their own love language.

He held her closer still, and suddenly she wakened and turned wholly to him, and kissed him with kisses which were ardent as his own, as passionate, as demanding.

He knew that he had taught her love, he knew it as surely, then, as if she had said it to him in words; she had for him that utter frankness in loving, that crystal headlong power to give which a woman feels only for one lover in her life; she may care many times, she may be no longer young when she feels it, but she feels it only once.

Sforza knew that Caro gave to him love's most wonderful gift, complete love which knew neither fear, nor shyness, nor reticence, which knew only how to give all.

* * * * *

"There is not a vast quantity of aids to beauty here," Caro said gaily, "but if I am to be deprived of washing—well, darling. . . . !"

"You are beautiful enough to stand even that!" Sforza assured her. Her voice laughed, his eyes did not, they were grim.

He had been obliged to tell Caro the well was "temporarily" inadequate.

Caro had said lightly: "Oh, what a bore," and had gone on making the coffee for breakfast. Now she came behind Sforza and drew back his hands into her own.

"Dear darling."

"Yes?" He could not turn his head.

"Our well is unlike Alice's, I'm afraid, inasmuch that it is far from well! Is it quite dead yet?"

She felt his body stiffen. He did not answer for a moment, then, at last he said:

"It is drying up."

Caro buried her face against his neck, her voice came a little muffled, but astonishingly undistressed:

"That's that, then!"

He swung round and faced her; her eyes really were untroubled, her lips smiling in reality. In that moment Sforza adored her gallantness with a fervour which was almost anguish.

His mind cried out to her: "You beautiful, splendid thing, true, every bit of you, fine all through."

Aloud he said, opening his hands with a little expressive gesture: "I'm afraid it is!"

And thereafter through the day, astonishingly, they spoke no more of the well.

"In the night she will tell me," Sforza thought.

He was right; that evening when they lay outside together, Caro asked, ruffling his hair with one hand:

"Just how long can we make coffee—and not wash—and last out, Giovanni?"

"I think a week," Sforza said; "and in a week," he leant his head down against her, "why, in a week a caravan or two may halt, a detachment of soldiers may hail us and want to arrest us, some of Robert's men may come to look for this cache. A week! Little, darling love, kingdoms have been made in a week——!"

"Few women have gone with their faces unwashed for that time, though, who were in love with their husbands," Caro interpolated. She tweaked a thick lock of Sforza's hair. "Dearest, I could paraphrase Henley's 'Bloody head' poem beautifully!"

Sforza burst out laughing.

"Baby, it's all right, do not worry, you shall wash your face. Vanity has ruled life since Eden, and——"

"Are you not my Adam?"

Yet, in the night, lying awake, whilst Sforza slept beside her, his arm, a heavy weight she loved across her breast, pinioning her even in his sleep, she faced death with eyes which held no laughter, and only that bravery of the truly brave, which holds fear in its depths, but will not show that fear.

She thought of John, of the mistakes she had made; he seemed infinitely far off from her, like some kindly memory, that was all. She had not made him happy, nor he her, but she had had another chance. She realized, then, that for all she had had she could make no adequate return.

Her thoughts drifted again. All that she would have said then, could never happen, had happened now. It was just a year since she left England!—all of England still stood—she would go out—and everything would continue. It seemed to-night grotesque, and yet marvellous, that thousands of miles away people still spoke of her, and laughed and talked, danced and dined. And all the while she was lost here in the heart of the desert . . . nothing she could do would avail her anything . . . the desert, its hidden power seemed to her like eternity, to be thought of only with a sensation of strained bewilderment. Yet the desert had given her Sforza, and eternity would hold him hers—the desert had given a freedom to love—after that freedom dare she complain, reproach? And to think of life without Sforza was to think of desolation unspeakable.

After all—to die was a very little thing.

"But I want to live, I want to live," she cried passionately within her heart.

As if he had in reality heard her cry, Sforza wakened and took her in his arms.

"We shall be together," he whispered.

* * * * *

They made a festa of the days, they went walks, ate up the dates and chocolates, and Caro washed every day triumphantly.

They never spoke of the last day of their week once in those days, they talked a great deal of their other lives, before they had met.

"Before your life had really started, darling," as Caro told Sforza modestly.

As the days passed and she never faltered, Sforza knew a pride he had never felt before; so women must have gone to the guillotine, but they had faced a quicker fate than Caro's.

Whilst she slept one afternoon he cleaned his revolver. Caro had never asked him how they should die, but he knew she knew.

He was a little surprised at the survival in himself of superstition. He would watch the sand swirling, and think: "If it blows over that stone a caravan will pass." Or he would count the clouds racing across the sky at evening and say: "If that fifth one passes the moon we shall be rescued!"

He told Caro, and they both laughed; they talked of inherited instincts, of reincarnation.

"I wonder how I died before," Caro said idly.

Sforza bent her head back against his shoulder and took her lips. For the first time for years tears stung his eyes.

"Not with the simplicity and magnificence you bring to it now," he said hoarsely.

"But I have you," Caro said. "I have you, and you will be with me, we shall never be separated. It

is that knowledge, separation, an end must come which hurts life so. Directly you love you know that fear, and pray against it."

* * * * *

On the last night Sforza built a huge fire, it leapt and sang, spears of living scarlet and gold flashed out from it.

Sforza, watching it, thought: "It will die in the dawn; we have one night more, too."

They slept in one another's arms; strangely, they slept late, the sun was over everything when they awoke.

"Oh, divine!" Caro said. "You know, Giovanni, the desert *is* the Garden of Eden; at least, one can feel in it as one never could elsewhere. *I* can—for you!"

They breakfasted under the palms, and when Sforza had carried away the cups he came back and lay on the hot sand beside Caro.

She looked down at the adoration of his upturned face.

"I remember meeting you—in—in nearly '22!" she teased him, and then suddenly a little rush of words came: "Oh, Giovanni, do you remember the inn, and the nasturtiums, and the wood—and you riding up——"

"And you sitting on a green chair," Sforza ran on, "in a lime-coloured dress, and a hat with leaves that matched your eyes, green—green—lilac-leaf green. Heavens, how beautiful I thought you were!"

"Were—was——?" Caro murmured provocatively.

"*Are*, for ever will be—every bit of you. I wish I could kiss you all over, and each kiss tell you so——"

"My darling, you see me with enchanted, blinded gaze!"

"I see you as you are, my heart's desire, my soul's

fulfilment, the one woman of the world, the finest, the clearest, the bravest, the most wonderful——"

"The bravest?" she whispered, and he noticed that her lips were dry. He knew that she was thirsty.

He knelt up and said:

"The very bravest, Beautiful."

Caro laughed, a little huskily. She said:

"Well, help the very bravest up, then, darling, and let us walk—shall we? It is so hot sitting still. Let us talk of Paris again and how we met, you in such nice riding-kit, looking as indifferent as you please, and I in lime-coloured muslin, thinking you were——"

"Yes, what?"

She laughed into his eyes.

"Shall I really tell you? I think it would be good for your vanity! Thinking you were rather well pleased with your darling self, as indeed you were, and that you felt you had a right to be!"

"I hadn't then," Sforza said. "I have now: you love me."

He kissed her very gently. She was white; there were faint lilac-petal shadows beneath her lilac-leaf eyes now. But neither spoke of this. Both had lived life as such a gallant thing, a thing of pure generosities, sunlit outlook. They faced the sun still, indomitable, serene.

Both knew.

Caro halted first. She stood before Sforza and said:

"Kiss me as you kissed me that first time, my lover and my beloved. And, oh"—her lips quivered a very little—"Giovanni, other soul of me, be quick—promise me."

"I promise," he said.

He took her in his arms and kissed her. It was as if through the portals of her lips he drew her soul into himself.

They stood apart, the sunshine pouring over them.

Caro said:

"Oh, Giovanni, in the sunlight—like that—— Oh, my darling, I wish we might go on—a sign—a symbol of our love—to live still——"

She went to him and took his head between her hands.

"Darling little boy—all I shall ever have——"

In her eyes there was a tenderness which was holy. She loosed him.

"Beautiful," he said, "look straight into the blueness, and know that we belong for ever."

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